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Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Decoy Duck.

BY EDWARD L. WHEELER.



"WHAT HAVE YOU TO SAY FOR YOURSELF, PRISONER?"

Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Decoy Duck;

OR, THE

Cowboy Chief's Tenderfoot-Tangle.

BY ED. L. WHEELER,

AUTHOR OF THE "DEADWOOD DICK" NOVELS,
ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE CRISIS AT CLEAR WATER.

"Whoa, Pontius Pilate! Dad-gast yer old hide! whoa!" and a remarkably homely individual drew rein in front of the Antelope Hotel, at the town of Clear Water, in Wyoming.

He was a man of middle age, with a bearded face, clad in rough garments that had evidently seen hard service, and was mounted upon a mule quite as homely as he was himself.

A rifle was slung at his back, pistol and knife were in his belt, but, most remarkable of all, a parrot was perched upon his right shoulder.

His loud command to the mule brought the loungers in the Antelope to the door.

"How d'ye do?" the new-comer greeted. "This hyer ornery mewel goes ter sleep when he's on ther trail, an' I have ter wake him up ter git him ter come to a stop. Ther durndest mewel ye ever did see, I swar! But, what place is this hyer I'm at, citizens?"

"This hyar is Clear Water, stranger," answered the proprietor of the hotel, one Moses Stone.

"Whisky straight!"

So cried the parrot on the man's shoulder, to the amazement of all.

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed the stranger. "No clear water fer you, Polly, nary a time; you want the straight booze or nothin'."

"You bet!" cried the bird. "Polly want booze! Whoop-ee! set 'em up again!"

"Wal, I'll be blowed!" ejaculated the proprietor of the Antelope. "Did ye ever hear the likes of that, boys?"

And the "boys" declared they never had, and everybody within sight and hearing on the one street of the little town came running to the spot.

"Which way do you come from, stranger?" asked one man, a tall individual, with a face indicative of strong character—a man wearing a slouch hat, garments of jean, and cowhide boots, and evidently a granger.

There were many others like him about the village, and it seemed to be an idle day with them.

"I'm fresh up from Cheyenne," the man on the mule answered. "My name is Pete Parrot, and I'm on my way to Deadwood, by slow and easy stages. I reckon ter stop hyer and rest up a spell, ef ther landlord kin 'com-ydate me."

"I can do that," assured Mr. Stone.

"What I wanted to ask," continued the tall man, "did you see any cattle moving up in this direction?"

"Wull, I ruther reckon I did, pardner," was the decisive answer. "One herd of about a couple o' thousand at least. An', that wasn't all, either."

"What more?"

"This mornin' I passed within sight of a hundred cowboys in camp about a dozen miles over the ridges yar," indicating the direction.

"Just what I expected," cried the tall man, savagely. "We have got to fight for our rights, friends and neighbors. Who will volunteer to carry the word to the settlers in every direction?"

"I will!"

"So will I!"

"Count me in!"

So responded at least a dozen of the by-

standers quickly, so there were enough for the service and to spare.

"Mount and be off, then, at once," the tall man ordered. "Go in every direction and tell them to gather in haste, armed to the teeth. We'll teach those Cheyenne grab-all's a lesson, I opine."

"You bet we wull, Long John!"

"And say, whichever of you goes my way, tell Bob Haley to leave a couple of his men at my house to take care of Mercy."

"All right, Long John; we'll do that, you bet!"

"And I'll bet the gal don't stay thar to be taken keer of," another declared. "She'll be hyer on that pony of hern as soon as any of 'em. Never seen sech a gal fer darin' as Mercy Blodgett."

"What in ther name o' snakes is up?" asked the new-comer, as he looked on and listened. "Goin' ter have a scrimmage?"

"It looks like it," he was answered.

"What seems ter be ther diffikilty? Grangers and cattlemen goin' to war?"

"You have struck it right, my man," assured Long John Blodgett. "They are determined to tear down our fences and ruin our grain and corn in order to reach the water with their cattle, and we are determined they shall not do it. We'll see, now, who will win the case."

"That's ther way of et, hey?"

"Exactly."

And such, in truth, was the situation.

The town of Clear Water was on a tributary of the North Fork of the Platte, and the grangers had the river fenced in for a distance of at least twenty miles in each direction.

Just here the land was particularly rich, and the settlers discovering this to be so, had taken it up in preference to other locales. The center of the belt had now a thriving village, with school, church, and so forth, and the whole country round was a waving sea of corn and grain, for the protection of which the settlers had joined hands in putting up miles of barb-wire fence.

These fences stretched away on each side of the river, league after league—and men were employed solely to ride up and down the long stretches to keep the barrier in order. And these fences, it is easy to understand, were the cattlemen's particular thorn in the flesh. The country was unusually rich for grazing purposes, but the grass was useless unless the cattle could reach the river for water. And this they could not do owing to the settlers' wire fences.

There had been two or three lively brushes between the cowboys and the grangers, in which the cowboys had so far gotten the worst of it. Two or three lives had been lost on each side, and the "cow-punchers" had sworn that they would carry their point if they had to wipe out the whole settlement to do it. So, trouble had been looked for, and now this news brought by Pete Parrot, of an immense herd of cattle between there and Cheyenne, and the fact that so many cowboys were camping near by, went to show that the trouble was close at hand.

There were, of course, trails leading to and from Clear Water which were open to the river, fenced on each side, but these were worse than useless for a herd of a thousand head or more.

What was demanded, was an open way to the Platte, at least a whole quarter-section wide, and no one granger felt like yielding his claim.

Then, too, this would mean the demolition of the adjoining sections on either side of him.

Miles to the east the river was accessible, and the same was the case on the west, but in each place the pasture was thin, and it would occupy nearly the whole time to drive the herds to and from water there.

No; the cattlemen wanted to graze their

cattle on the "fat belt," and were determined to water them there, too, no matter what the grangers said about it, irrespective of their rights in the matter; so, just now, at the opening of our story, the matter was coming to a crisis.

The big herds, it may be added, belonged to capitalists of Cheyenne and other cities, which made the feeling on the part of the grangers all the more bitter against them.

And of the hundred cowboys reported by Pete Parrot, it was safe to estimate that nine-tenths were not cowboys at all, but border ruffians always ready to fight for pay.

At any rate, such was the grangers' opinion.

Half a dozen horsemen set quickly off in as many different directions while Pete Parrot and Long John Blodgett were talking.

"Wull, to let ye know right to oncet which side of ther line I'm on," declared Pete, "you kin count me in on your side, grangers. Hyer I am, fer what I'm worth, and you ar' welcome to me."

"But, you have no interest at stake here, my man," argued Blodgett.

"Ain't I? Thar's whar you ar' wrong. Hyer's this infernal old mewel, Pontius Pilate, and hyer's my bird Polly; reckon I'll fight to defend them."

"Yes; but you might move right on and so get out of it altogether."

"That ain't ther style of Pete Parrot. I counted on stoppin' hyer to rest up when I sighted your town, and I don't mean to scare off fer a cent. Hence, I am a granger while I'm with ye."

"All right, then. You look like a tough customer, and I have no doubt you are, but if your heart is in the right place, that is all that is required of you. It is going to be no child's play, you can see that for yourself, and you are going into it with your eyes open."

"Don't worry 'bout me," Pete waived. "Me an' Pontius Pilate an' Polly hev had many a close call in our time, an' we ar' made of ther stuff that don't scare; ain't I right, Polly?"

"Bet your life on it, Pete! Polly want booze! Set 'em up for Polly!"

"You shall have et, Polly, straight as they make it o' moonshine!"

CHAPTER II.

ACCUSED OF MURDER.

"HILLO, sonny, where goin'?"

"Hev ye lost yer mar? Ye look like a strayed calf."

"I have lost my way, my friends. Can you direct me to Clear Water? I am a stranger in these parts."

"No need ter tell us that; ye have ther stamp of tenderfoot all over ye. So ye want ter go to Clear Water, do ye? Might we ask what yer business is?"

"I have no objection to telling you, gentlemen. I am going to see my uncle, Mr. Reuben Wickham. Maybe you know him. My name is Philip Billings. Now do me the favor to answer my question."

It was on the same day of which our first chapter treats.

A party of ten or a dozen cowboys, cantering across the prairie in the direction of Clear Water, had met a lone horseman.

He was a young man; and, judging by his attire, evidently was fresh from some Eastern city. It was apparent that he was not accustomed to the plains of the West, and he was greeted with the words above quoted.

The cowboys, if such they were—and they looked it—exchanged meaning glances with one another.

"Nephew to Reuben Wickham, eh?" their spokesman interrogated.

"Yes."

"Well, that bein' the case, we may have some news fer ye. Mebbly you are the old man's heir?"

"Good Heavens! what do you mean? you do not mean to tell me my uncle is dead, do you?"

Again did the cowboy band exchange glances, and as if all were moved by the same impulse their hands fell upon the butts of their revolvers.

"I didn't say so, did I?" demanded the spokesman.

"No; but something in your manner and words lead me to fear that such is the case. Do not withhold the worst from me, I beg of you."

"Think ye can stand et, eh?"

"I hope you will tell me the truth, and at once."

"Well, are we right in guessin' that you are his heir?"

"Yes, you are right in that. So far as I know I stand as his nearest of kin. Now tell me the worst."

"Fur as you know, ye say; ain't ye sure on that 'ar p'int?"

"Well, yes, I am sure, gentlemen."

"That bein' the case, mebbe the worst news we kin tell ye is ther best. The old gentleman is dead, sonny."

"Alas! Then I inferred the truth."

"Yes, he's dead, an' I take et you have arrived just in time to claim his wealth."

"That will be my sad duty, I suppose, but I did not know he was dead till this minute; I came to visit him."

The young man sat in his saddle, head bowed, looking at the ground.

"Ye don't ask when he died," the spokesman of the cowboy band insinuated, and he had now drawn his revolver from his belt, cocking it as he spoke.

The others did the same.

The stranger appeared not to notice what they were at.

"True, I did not," was the slow-spoken response. "When did he die? The blow is sudden."

"He died jest three weeks ago to-day."

"Poor uncle! What did he die of?"

"He was murdered."

"Murdered!"

"Exactly so."

"My God! you do not mean it!"

"Et's a fact, young man. An' ye don't ask who killed him."

"Heavens! you do not give me time. My uncle murdered—murdered. Yes, who did kill him? Why was he killed? Tell me all."

"Ha! interested now, are ye, after we have waked ye up to it? We rather think you know somethin' about et, Mr. Philip Billying, or whatever ye call yerself, an' you may consider yerself under arrest."

"Wh—what!"

"Jest that; you ar' our prisoner."

"But, good heavens, men, I—"

"That don't matter, you jest hold up your hands. Ike, you tie 'em, an' then we'll show him where Clear Water is."

"But, my friends, you are making a great mistake," the young man declared, in earnest tones. "I have just come here, and how can I have done the deed? I can prove where I was three weeks ago."

"Fool you'd be ef ye couldn't, is all I've got ter say. The only safe plan would be to hire a man to come here and do the business for ye, and then you would lope along later to pay your uncle a visit, and would naturally be greatly surprised to find him dead."

"My God! can you believe that of me?"

"We have to believe a good many things, these days. Have ye made him secure, Ike?"

"Yes, he's fast enough."

"Come along, then, and we'll take him up to see Rube Russel."

They set forth in a body, the prisoner riding between two of the men, and but little more was said.

The prisoner had not gone a great deal out of his way; had merely turned into a trail

that led away from the town he desired to reach. Had he continued on over the next rise of ground, he could have seen the town.

In a little while they rode through an opening in the wire fences, and followed on to the first habitations.

The town was considerably stretched out. After three or four houses had been passed, the cowboys drew rein before the next one they reached.

A rather good-looking man came out immediately, bare-headed, followed by a darky who stopped in the doorway to look on and listen.

"Who have you there?" the first-mentioned asked.

"A prisoner, as you see, Rube Russel," the chief of the cowboys answered. "I have reason ter think that he knows somethin' about ther murder of Rube Wickham, and so does my pard."

"The deuce you say! What leads you to suspect him guilty of that crime?"

"He claims ter be the old man's nephew, and as sech his only heir; and his words right from ther start hev made us s'picious of him. He claimed first off that he didn't know the old man was dead, but he didn't ask when he died, how he died, or anything about it."

"What have you to say for yourself, prisoner?"

"That these men wrong me greatly, sir," was the answer. "I am as innocent as you are. I had no idea that my uncle was dead. It was a great shock to me. These men urged questions upon me faster than they came to me naturally. Now that I have had time to think, I want to ask some questions in turn."

"What do you want to know?"

"Has the case been placed in the hands of detectives? The fact that I am arrested proves that the murderer has not yet been discovered nor the crime avenged. Besides this, I want the full particulars of the matter."

"What do you say now, Tom Smith?" asked Russel, turning to the cowboy leader.

"Jest as I did at first. He says he has had time to think about it, and that is jest the point. He has had time to think up some plan to get out of it. The fact that he is the old man's heir is suspicious enough, and I think he'd orter be held to answer."

"No, the matter has not been put in the hands of detectives," answered Russel, "but a reward of a thousand dollars has been offered, for Clear Water is not the place to allow a crime like that to go unavenged."

"Ha! and it was the prospect of winning the reward that made you so eager to put the crime on me, eh?" turning to the cowboy leader.

"Well, that figgered in, of course."

"I see it all, now. You stood ready to put the crime upon any one who happened along, if you could, for the sake of that paltry sum—"

"Hold yer hosses right thar!" Tom Smith ordered. "We ain't that kind out in these parts, tenderfoot. I leave et to Wyoming Walt, or Ike Wyman, ef we hadn't talked et all over and said it was most likely that Rube Wickham's heir had had him put out of the way."

"Before we knowed who his heir was, too," spoke up the one designated as Wyoming Walt.

"Then it seems I walked into a trap already set for me."

"Call et that way ef ye want to."

"Well, I assure you that you have made a mistake, gentlemen. In proof of it, I will add another thousand dollars to the sum already posted. I came here expecting to find my uncle in the full vigor of health, but instead of that I find him dead and buried—foully murdered! and I swear to you I will hunt down his slayer if it takes every dollar of property he left!"

"Boys," spoke up Rube Russel, "I don't think there is evidence sufficient to hold this young man. You had better let him go."

This man Russel was a constable and a deputy sheriff.

"Then you order him freed?" asked Cowboy Smith.

"Yes, let him go."

"All right."

The cords holding the man's hands were severed, and he was set at liberty, the cowboys returning their revolvers to their belts and holsters.

The tenderfoot stranger made inquiry where his uncle's house was, and it was pointed out to him. It was now closed up, since the murdered man had lived there all alone.

Making some inquiries further, the young man rode on in the direction of the hotel, it being his expressed intention to take dinner there—it was now high noon, after which he would take possession of his uncle's cabin.

CHAPTER III.

AN EXCITING INCIDENT AND A RESCUE.

RUBE RUSSEL and the cowboys looked after the tenderfoot stranger when he went on his way.

"As tender as tender can be," observed Tom Smith, the leader of the cowboy band. "It's a wonder his mar could trust him to come 'way out hyer alone."

"Seems to have some nerve, too," commented Ike Wyman. "He didn't faint when we took him prisoner. I expected to see him keel right over, and thought we'd have a time with him, but we didn't."

"Which makes me think the more he's guilty," added Cowboy Smith.

"Mebby he is an' mebbly he ain't," summed up Wyoming Walt—his name was Walter Treat. "He's too tender fer these diggin's."

"Yes, he is so innocent-looking that I can't think him guilty of his uncle's murder," said Rube Russel. "You can keep an eye on him, though, and see how he carries himself."

"Hillo! look'e thar!"

So exclaimed one of the cowboys, pointing as he spoke.

Exclamations fell from every lip, and every hand took a tighter hold upon the rein, ready for action.

Coming down the straight stretch between the lines of wire/fence, from the direction of the Antelope Hotel, was a woman on horseback, and it could be seen that she had lost control of the animal.

"That's Mercy Blodgett!" exclaimed Cowboy Smith.

"Tain't her pony," declared Wyoming Walt.

"No; she's on Long John's big stallion," cried Ike Wyman.

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Rube Russel. "She'll be killed! Boys, you must save her!"

"Et's the tenderfoot that'll git killed," shouted Cowboy Smith. "He don't know enough to git out of the way, and Thunderer will run him down."

"See! ther gal is motionin' him to clear ther road!"

"Ther dasted fool will be killed!"

The big stallion, Thunderer, an immense roan, was coming like the wind, and now it could be seen that the rein had broken, leaving his fair rider helpless.

Thunderer was not a vicious animal, and yet there were not many men at Clear Water who would care to mount him. Mercy Blodgett, nevertheless, sometimes took him in preference to her own gentle pony.

She liked excitement once in a while, she declared.

It was exciting now, truly.

Philip Billings, the tenderfoot stranger, rode on peacefully, seemingly unaware of his danger.

The young woman was shouting to him, but he heeded not, riding straight on in the face of the danger, evidently deaf and heedless to it all.

"Turn out!" yelled Cowboy Smith, though the tenderfoot was almost too far away to hear him now. "Turn out! you howlin' idiot, ye! Et will be your death and the gal's, too, ef ye don't!"

"Clear the road! Clear the road!"

So shouted they all.

It was a moment of great excitement, and Rube Russel dashed some drops of perspiration from his forehead.

He had been eating his dinner when the cowboys came up with their prisoner, and had risen from the table and come out hatless, his long hair brushed straight back on his head.

Be was now pale, and was strikingly handsome, with his splendid mustache.

Rube Russel was one of Mercy Blodgett's lovers. He had been for a long time seeking her favor—indeed her hand, but the girl had thus far refused to listen to his suit.

A sudden resolution seized Russel now.

"Tom, let me have your horse," he cried. "Impossible to get mine quick enough to do any good. I will save Mercy Blodgett or die in the attempt."

Even while Rube spoke Cowboy Smith leaped to the ground, and Russel vaulting into the saddle was off like the wind to meet the danger, the cowboys sending up a cheer to encourage him.

At this cheer the tenderfoot stranger looked back over his shoulder, as if to ascertain what it meant.

"Get out of the way!" roared Russel. "Clear the road!"

All this took place in less time than it has taken to put the words upon paper.

Thunderer was now close upon the tenderfoot, and again did the helpless rider call to the man to get out of the way, but he heeded not.

"The blasted fool!" muttered Wyoming Walt, as he and the other cowboys sat and watched, their faces blanched, expecting to see the death of the young woman and yet helpless to save her.

Nor could they avert their eyes from the awful sight.

Suddenly the tenderfoot was seen to straighten up in his saddle, and to draw up a little on the rein, but he made no move to get out of the way of the stallion, and a collision seemed certain to be the result. It was a moment of terrible suspense for the on-lookers.

In front of the Antelope Hotel was another crowd, and from that direction, too, horsemen were coming with all speed.

The girl could have slipped from the saddle, but only at the risk of limb or life.

"Out of the way, sir! out of the way!"

"I'll save you," her suppressed ears heard in response.

The horses were now only a few yards apart, and no one else heard the words.

All saw what took place, however, with greatest surprise, yet with admiration none could conceal.

Another mighty leap of the stallion, yet another, and then the last, and the two horses met, but not to collide as had been the fearful anticipation.

The tenderfoot was seen to brace himself at the last moment, and his horse, at the last leap of the stallion, swerved just enough for the purpose, as if it understood well its master's intent.

This, and with a sweep of his arm the tenderfoot stranger caught the young woman out of the saddle, and the stallion thundered on.

Immediately cheers arose from the crowd at the hotel and from the cowboys at Rube

Russel's cabin, while Rube himself and the other horsemen who were coming immediately slackened pace.

"That feller's a Buffalo Bill," cried the proprietor of the hotel.

"Yas, or a Wild Bill, or a Texas Jack, or some sech breed," added another of the same group.

"Whoever he is, he has saved my child," said Long John Blodgett, fervently, "and he has won my undying good-will."

Among the cowboys who had captured the stranger the amazement was greater.

"Who would 'a' thought et?" gasped Tom Smith.

"Rube himself couldn't 'a' done et any better, ef so well," declared Ike Wyman, candidly.

"You ar' right," agreed Wyoming Walt. "I ain't no slouch of a rider, ef I do say et myself, but I couldn't 'a' done that trick any neater'n that, an' that's ther gospel truth."

They rode forward now after Russel, Cowboy Smith and the darky following on foot.

Meantime the rescued and rescuer were not silent.

"I thank you for my life, sir," spoke Mercy Blodgett, as soon as she could speak at all after her rescuer had placed her upon her feet on the ground. "I certainly expected Thunderer would kill you."

"Do not mention it, pray," was the response. "I hope it did not hurt you, the shock, so sudden. I felt certain that the animal would kill you unless I could rescue you, and I made the attempt. Thank God I did not miscalculate. Still, the man coming would no doubt have saved you."

He indicated with a motion of his head, and Mercy looking, saw Rube Russel approaching.

"I thank God it was you and not he," she fervently declared.

"Ah! why do you say that?"

"I do not like the man."

"Pardon my impertinent question."

"I will not so consider it; it was a natural one."

"You are gracious, and I thank you. May I ask your name?"

"Certainly you may; my name is Mercy Blodgett. And what is yours?"

"Philip Billings."

The tenderfoot stranger had stopped, and the young woman was standing beside his horse.

She could not but admire the strength which had not only snatched her from the back of the running horse, but had with the same motion placed her so gently and lightly upon her feet.

The man certainly did not look equal to it, in his neat attire, but she had felt his strength and knew it was there. And she noted, too, as she looked up into his fine, dark eyes, that he was handsome. She removed her gaze and fixed it upon the ground.

Just then Rube Russel came up.

"Thank God you are safe, Mercy!" he cried.

"Not forgetting this gentleman also," the young woman reminded.

"Certainly not. Sir, you did that nobly. But, who would have thought it of you?"

"Well, I don't know, I'm sure; why are you so surprised about it? Was it not the only thing that could be done?"

"Yes, that's true; but, you do not look like a horseman. Where did you learn to ride and manage a horse like that?"

"I have taken some lessons."

"Oh!"

The stallion had been allowed to run on, the cowboys at Russel's cabin not attempting to stop it.

These cowboys now came up, and Russel directed some of them to follow the runaway and bring it back as soon as it could be captured without danger of doing it

harm, and as soon as they were off Russel dismounted.

"Miss Blodgett," he offered, "do me the favor to ride this horse back to the hotel, where Tom Smith can get it."

"Thank, you, Mr. Russel," was the cool response, "but I prefer to walk back."

"Well, just as you please, then."

The man's face darkened, and he looked displeased, and the more so as Mercy gave the tenderfoot stranger a bow and smile as she turned to go.

The tenderfoot lifted his hat politely in acknowledgment.

"A word with you," spoke Russel.

"Well?"

The new-comer turned to him, coolly, and Russel spoke rapidly in order that others coming up might not hear.

"You were fortunate in rescuing the lady from her danger, sir," he said. "I thank you for the service. But, mind you, see that it ends right where it is. Do you understand?"

"I am afraid I do not, sir," the tenderfoot stranger answered.

"Well, I can make it plainer. See that it ends right where it is. That young lady is to become my wife, so take care that this accident does not give rise to any sentimental notions on your part."

"Oh! that is the way of it, eh?"

"Yes."

"Well, I am not given to interfering in such matters, sir. If what you say is true you have nothing to fear from me."

"That's all that's necessary to be said, then."

Russel vaulted into the saddle again and rode back in the direction of his cabin, but surrendered the animal to its owner when he met him.

The darky turned back with his master, while Cowboy Smith dashed forward, speedily caught up with the tenderfoot stranger and rode along with him in the direction of the hotel.

They overtook the young lady, and soon met the others who were coming from the direction of the hotel, and all went on in company.

"That was neat done, stranger," Cowboy Smith complimented. "I reckon Rube Russel had rather done et himself than seen you do et, though."

"Yes, I am sure of that."

"And, stranger, jest a word of warnin' to ye: Rube Russel has already one rival fer that gal's hand, and you had better not get mixed up in et. Et's nothin' to me, but I've warned ye."

This in low tone as they rode along. In a few minutes more the hotel was reached, and Mercy Blodgett ran to her father's arms.

CHAPTER IV.

FORWARD INTO BATTLE.

By this time the grangers were beginning to gather from every direction.

They came in singly and by twos and threes, and each man of them was armed to the teeth and wore a grim expression on his face.

There were a good many of these before the hotel when Mercy Blodgett and those with her came up, and immediately a cheer was proposed for the tenderfoot stranger who had so nobly rescued Mercy.

"That's what's ther matter," shouted Pete Parrot, with his bird still on his shoulder. "Give him three rousin' big cheers an' a ring-tailed tiger, fer he deserves et all. All together, now, an' we'll split ther welkin from north to south like a yaller punkin!"

The cheers were given, and with a will. Long John, having embraced his daughter, then stepped forward and extended his hand to the tenderfoot.

"Young man," he said, "I want to thank

you heartily for saving my child when she was in such peril. I owe it all. If you want a friend you know where to find him. What's your name?"

"Thank you sir. My name is Philip Billings."

"And you are from the East?"

"Yes, sir."

"So I judged by your appearance. Do you intend stopping here?"

"I do, sir."

"Well, it is only fair that I should warn you that we are at war here, and there is likely to be a battle before night. If you want to keep out of the unpleasantness, now is your opportunity."

"In what manner?"

"By going on to the next town."

"Much obliged to you, sir, but I can't do it. My business is here."

"What is your business? Don't think I ask idly; I owe you a debt of gratitude, and feel concern for your safety."

"For which I thank you, but you need not be anxious about me. I am only a tenderfoot, as they call me, but I feel able to take care of Number One. I came here to visit my uncle."

"Your uncle?"

"Reuben Wickham."

"Have you heard the sad news concerning him?"

"Yes; and I had the misfortune to be arrested as his murderer and brought before your constable."

Explanations followed, which to quote would be to repeat what has already been set forth, to which Mr. Blodgett and the crowd listened with interest.

"So, as I say," the young stranger concluded, "I add another thousand to the reward, and I hope some one will earn it. Reuben Wickham's death must be avenged, and the duty falls upon me."

"God grant you may succeed."

"But, you have not told me the particulars of the crime."

"I thought you had heard them. The deed was done just three weeks ago last night. Your uncle had been up to the hotel during the evening, as was his custom, and started to go to his cabin about nine o'clock. Next morning he was found a few yards from his cabin door, stabbed to the heart."

"And there was no clue?"

"None."

"No track near the body that was noticed?"

"The trouble was, the ground was all tracked up before that was thought of."

"And you have no detective here?"

"No; unless you want to call Rube Russell such. He is our deputy sheriff, and takes charge of all such matters, though this is the first of the kind we have ever had to do with."

"And he gave it up?"

"He did."

"It is a strange matter, truly. Is there any opinion as to what the motive could have been?"

"That is not known. Your uncle was a harmless, inoffensive man, and was on good terms with everybody, so far as known. He was rich, as you are of course aware, but he was not robbed."

"He owned considerable in land and cattle, did he not?"

"More than considerable, if that will fit. He was the fortunate man who owned the section on which this town sprung up. Consequently, all he had to do was to fold his hands and see his riches grow. I won't pretend to say just how much he was worth."

"Is much of the town center still in his name?"

"Yes, a good deal of it. He owned this hotel, and a good many other buildings you see around. Since you say you are his heir, you have fallen into a rich thing here—that is, if the cut-throats from Cheyenne don't lay

it all in ashes before to-morrow morning. It is our business to see that they don't do that, if we can, but they are reported strong."

"And you see I have more at stake than you at first supposed."

"So it seems. Well, all our interests are identical, and we must stand together. But, my child," turning again to Mercy, "this is no place for you. What made you come here, and especially on Thunderer?"

"To take part in the fight, papa, of course."

"I will not allow it!"

"Oh, but you must! I could not sit there in the house, as you wished, and have two men left there to guard me, for that would make you just three fighters short, and that would never do. And the reason I mounted Thunderer, I did not want to risk my dear pony."

"Yet you thought nothing of yourself, far dearer to me than a hundred ponies, or men either, for the matter of that."

"I can take care of myself, papa. I could not bear the thought of you in danger and I not near you. Do not send me home, I beg, for I should die there of fear and anxiety."

Long John turned away to conceal a moisture about the eyes.

"May as well tell you to have your own way about it," he said. "A woman is bound to do as she pleases anyhow."

"That's what's the matter," chipped in Pete Parrot. "Et's no use kickin' if a woman says she will do a thing, for that settles it—till she changes her mind. She kin do that oftener 'n any other critter on earth."

"Thank you, sir," said Mercy, with a smile and a bow.

"Oh, you ar' welcome, I'm sure, miss," the homely fellow rejoined, with a grin.

"Set 'em up again!" chimed in the parrot on his shoulder.

Mercy Blodgett and the others who had not yet heard the bird talk, looked at it in amazement.

"Set 'em up again!" the parrot repeated. "Polly want boozel! Paint whole town red. Whoop-la!"

"My goodness!" gasped Mercy. "You wicked creature! I should like to wring your neck."

"I'd a good deal rather hev ye to wring mine than hurt Polly," declared Pete. "I prize Polly above anything else I possess upon earth, not even exceptin' my mewel, Pontius Pilate."

"And I don't know but you deserve the process," declared Mercy, fearlessly, "for having taught an innocent creature such talk as that. I was never so shocked in my life, sir, truly. Why, it is perfectly awful, sir, to hear a bird asking for strong drink!"

All around were laughing, even to Long John himself.

"Thar's danger that ye will git shocked a good deal wuss, miss, ef ye wait around to hear ther bird say more," declared Pete.

"I opine he knows every cuss-word in ther hull darn cattylogue, an' he ain't bashful about usin' 'em, either. But, to save yer purty ears from blushin' I'll jest jam him into my pocket, like unto thusly."

As he spoke, Pete took the parrot from his shoulder, doubled it up in apparently the roughest manner, and thrust it into one of his capacious pockets.

"You cruel man!" the young woman exclaimed, at once moved to pity for the parrot.

"Jest like a woman," cried Pete, laughing.

At that moment a shouting was heard.

It was from the east, and looking in that direction the first thing visible was a cloud of dust. The wind was from that direction.

Then, presently, the dust lifted, or parted, and horsemen were seen tearing toward

the center of the town at their best speed, shouting as they came and waving their hats.

"To arms!" their cry. "To arms! to arms!"

The crowd before the hotel sent up a responsive yell, and every man who had a horse vaulted into the saddle.

"Oh, that I had Thunderer here now!" cried Mercy Blodgett. "The excitement is going to begin, and I shall not be in it. Do you see them coming with Thunderer, boys?"

"Yes, they are comin' with him, miss," one granger answered.

"Good! good!"

She clapped her hands with delight, and the tenderfoot stranger looked upon her with admiring glance.

On came the horsemen, with whoop and hurrah, a strong number of them, their leader a handsome, fearless-faced young man of twenty-five, with long yellow hair that rested on his shoulders.

They came up, covered with dust, and Long John, having sprung into his saddle on a big bay, demanded:

"What is up, Haley?"

"The Cheyenne cowboys are coming in force over the ridge," the answer, pointing the direction.

Owing to the buildings, they could not be seen from here, but it was not necessary to see them in order to believe the report of Fair-hair Haley, as he was called.

"Coming, straight for the town?" asked Blodgett.

"No, seem to be aiming for the big bend below here, where the ford used to be 'fore it was fenced."

"Then there we must meet them. How many are there, Haley?"

"A hundred, at a guess."

"They will make it hot for us."

"You bet! But, where is Miss Mercy?"

"Right here, Bob," the young woman answered for herself. "I'll be with you as soon as they bring Thunderer back to me."

"Heavens, no; you must not think of it! Mr. Blodgett, you will not allow it, I hope. Mercy, since you would not remain at the house, you must stay here at the hotel."

"And let father go to meet danger without me? Not much, Bob Haley; you know me better than that, I hope."

"But, I will be with him, Mercy."

"So will I."

Just then the cowboys who had gone after Thunderer came up with the magnificent stallion.

The bridle had been tied, so there was little danger that it would break again, and Mercy immediately requested a "foot" to mount and it was given her.

She had on a belt with a couple of revolvers thrust in it, and with her white felt hat pushed up from her forehead she made a striking picture of a fearless woman of the plains, and a handsome one.

Barely had she mounted when Rube Russell, handsome and noble-looking, came up with a dash from the direction of his cabin.

"What madness is this?" he demanded.

"What?" asked Mercy.

He had spoken to her.

"That you are here, mounted upon this stallion again, and here with men who are going out to fight?"

"There is no madness about it, sir," was the cold answer. "I know very well what I am doing, and it will please me better if you will not meddle."

"But, if you are thinking of going out to fight, I forbid it. I will not allow you to risk your life in this manner."

"Ha! ha! ha! What is my life to you? And who has given you control over me, let me ask?"

"Your life is everything to me, Mercy Blodgett, and I demand—"

"It is nothing to you, Rube Russel, and never can be. As for your demands, you have no right to make any of me."

Long John, Mercy's father, was too busy arranging his forces to hear anything of this, and Fair-hair Haley, too, was busy for the moment. The tenderfoot stranger was near by.

Rube Russel looked at him, as if blaming him for something.

"Are you going?" he demanded.

"Do you imagine that I would remain behind, if this lady is brave enough to go?" the tenderfoot counter-demanded.

"What is this fight to you?"

"I have as much at stake as any one, I guess," was the answer to that.

"Perhaps there is an attraction. Remember the warning I have already given you, if so, and beware!"

"You are talking through your hat," was the tenderfoot's cool response to the insinuation. "Even were it so, you would not be losing anything, judging by what I have just heard."

With a look darker still, Russel turned away.

The men were now in order, or nearly so, and a grim, determined-looking force they were.

Long John had been in the military service some years before, and he was the one who had been chosen as leader. He had already done service on two or three occasions.

"Attention!" he now called, raising a switch he had in his hand as he might have raised a sword, and instantly every voice was stilled, and all gave respectful notice to the brief directions he had to give. That done, he gave the order—"Forward!" and away they dashed.

CHAPTER V.

THE FIGHT BEGINS.

This was just what Clear Water had been looking for.

Threats had been made many times against the settlers, or grangers, and now they were about to be carried out.

Unquestionably the grangers were in the right, but the cattlemen were determined to wrest their rights from them. They were, practically, claiming the whole earth as theirs.

They owned nothing save their vast herds, which they were grazing upon public ground free of cost, and yet they were not satisfied to allow other men to remain in peaceful possession of what they owned. They wanted access to every river and street, everywhere.

Their argument was, that the flowing water was free to every man and beast, anywhere and everywhere, and no man had a right to fence it in. If they had cattle, their cattle must have water, and they were determined to have it at the nearest point to the best grazing. On the other hand, the grangers pointed out that it was not a question of water alone.

Those of their number who had property that did not touch the river at all, a quarter-section or half-section, as the case might be, had been obliged to put up fences in order to protect their crops just the same as the others. It was not a question of water with them; the cattlemen were welcome to the water; but, they could not, and they should not, trample down and destroy corn and grain in order to get it just where it pleased them.

Here we have the wire fence wars in a nutshell.

The fenced-in roadway, or trail, that led out to the open prairie, was not very wide.

It was the width of ordinary country roads anywhere, and the ground being level or only rolling at most in long undulations, several of the horsemen were able to ride abreast.

Rube Russel had now pushed toward the front of the column, after his last words with the tenderfoot stranger.

The fence on each side, however, prevented him from reaching there.

Long John and Fair-hair Haley were riding together, and were talking as they went along. Mercy Blodgett and Philip Billings rode side by side near the rear.

It could be seen that Rube Russel was trying hard to reach the head, but it was impossible, almost, for him to do so, and he did not succeed until the horsemen rode out upon the open plain.

The cowboys were coming in a body, now not more than a mile away.

Long John gave an order, and his force began to separate into two divisions, one turning to the right and the other to the left of the trail, deploying along the line of fence in each direction.

Blodgett himself remained on the left, while Bob Haley took command of the division on the right.

The men were rapidly taking their places, about two fence-posts apart, riding to their positions at a canter, some with yells of defiance to their foes who were rapidly drawing near.

As soon as Rube Russel came out of the lane, as it was called, he cried out:

"Long John, who is to command here on the right?"

"I have given it to Haley."

"You have?"

"Yes."

"And what do you expect me to do?"

"Do your part, like the rest of us. You know what is required of you."

"Well, I demand a place according to my station. I have more right to command here than that yellow-haired boy."

"This is no time to quarrel; ride out and tell Haley I want him, and you assume command in his place, then. We will have a talk about this matter when there is more time."

Russel gave a half-military salute, and dashed away.

Mercy and the tenderfoot had not come out of the lane yet, but they saw this action.

"I know what he has said as well as though I was there," said Mercy. "He has demanded Bob Haley's place of father, and has got it. But, I am glad of it."

"Why are you glad?" asked Billings.

"Isn't Haley in your father's employ?"

"He is papa's foreman, and I am glad he will be with papa. What do you think of papa's plan? Do you understand military tactics?"

"I think his plan is excellent," was the answer. "By thus deploying his men a volley from the foe can do but little harm, while if they come on in a body as they are now riding they will get a bad dose."

"But, by coming in a body they will break through."

"They will place themselves in a bad situation if they do that, for our men will have them in a trap."

"How came you to know anything of war?"

"Any one can see this."

They now dashed out upon the plain with the others, and Mercy immediately ran across to where her father was standing.

The tenderfoot did not follow her, for reasons best known to himself.

He had ascertained that the girl had accepted the attentions of Bob Haley, and Rube Russel's attitude was not to be mistaken. Perhaps Billings did not want to arouse the enmity of either.

Be that as it might, he turned to the right and dashed away down the deployed line in that direction.

Russel had now reached Haley, and the latter was riding toward Long John.

The foe was almost at hand.

Billings went about half-way down the line, and there he stopped, backing his horse to the fence between two others of the defenders.

"What are you doing here?" demanded one of these.

"I am here to fight, if need be," was the answer of the tenderfoot.

"Yes, but Long John said we must deploy two posts apart, and here you have come between."

"You have done your duty, then, and my stopping here does not increase the danger for you in the least. The enemy is upon us, now."

With a wild whoop the hundred or so of cowboys, as they claimed to be, came down toward the lane at a mad gallop, and as they came they fired a volley, cutting down three or four horses and wounding or killing two or three men.

Long John signaled to fire.

Puffs of blue smoke were seen instantly almost the entire length of both the deployed lines, and before all the reports were heard there was seen a break in the bunched cowboys as men and horses in the front went down to the ground, some of them to rise no more.

There was a moment's pause, and the signal was given again.

Again the little puffs of smoke, again the sharp crack of the rifles and revolvers, and confusion in the bunch of cowboys was increased and they broke and ran for their lives.

"Hurrah!" went up the cheer from the grangers.

At least a dozen horses, and eight or ten men, were left behind on the ground, and some of them were dead.

"That is the way to give it to 'em, boys," congratulated Rube Russel, looking down his line of men, and as he looked he caught sight of the tenderfoot.

"Here, you," he called, "come out from there."

Billings rode toward him.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"What are you doing there?"

"Firing, the same as the others."

"Yes, but you made three in a bunch there."

"Beg your pardon, but I bunched by myself. The others were no nearer together than now."

"That makes no difference. You go and take your place at the end of the line, if you want to fight with us. I am in command of this division."

"Very well."

The tenderfoot turned and rode toward the lane.

"Here! where are you going?" Russel called out, sharply.

"To the end of the line, as you directed," was the answer he got.

"But, I meant the other end of the line."

"I prefer this end. A man has been cut down here, and I'll take his place." And the tenderfoot dashed on, Russel glaring after him fiercely.

The tenderfoot had barely paused to answer, and in a few moments was at the head of the line, with Fair-hair Haley next to him at the head of the other line. Long John and Mercy were dashing away to the opposite end.

"Where is your commander going?" asked the tenderfoot.

"To the other end, in order to have his daughter less exposed. She was determined to be with him."

"Then that becomes the head of the line."

"Yes, it would appear so, but he has put me in command here."

"The deuce! Then that puts me in an awkward situation. This is where Mr. Russel ought to be."

"I wish he wasn't here at all, confound him! He is too important, by half. If he

demands your place, yield it to him and come over with me. Long John has mentioned you."

"Mentioned me?"

"Says you're not as tender as you look."

"Well, maybe he is right; we'll have to see when it comes to the test."

"Just then Russel, seeing what Long John was doing, dashed to the other end of his own line to take his place there."

"See, he's imitating, without knowing why he does it," cried Haley. "Still, he can command from there if he knows how, which I doubt very much. Have you ever had experience?"

"I have seen military movements."

"And I have served for a time at one of the forts."

The cowboys were now gathered in a bunch again just out of range, and were evidently holding a council of war among themselves.

One of the wounded ones was creeping toward them, and some of the fallen horses were kicking and thrashing about in their pain and struggles. It had the appearance of real war on a small scale.

Suddenly a movement was seen on the part of the foe.

They divided into two bodies, and dashed away toward the opposite ends of the lines of defense.

"They have done it now!" cried Fair-hair Haley, joyfully. "I'd like to see them join each other again if they can. Attention, men! Forward!"

He raised his hand as he gave the order, and darted out upon the plain, the line swinging out after him in excellent order, giving one the idea of a net, or rope, reaching out to encircle its prey.

The other line remained motionless, awaiting the order from Rube Russel.

The tenderfoot rode out a few yards and looked down the line, and as he did so Russel appeared at the other end waving his arm.

He had seen the movement of Long John's men, and again meant to imitate, but he was in the wrong position to take the lead himself, while the important place was held by Billings.

"Your commander motions us to do the same as the other line," the tenderfoot cried out. "Follow me, in order. Forward!"

Touching his horse he galloped out, and the men having the example of the other line to take pattern after, swung out after him and away they circled, the tenderfoot leading, Rube Russel really at the foot of the deployed line doing nothing.

The same was Long John's position, but in that case it was from choice, with a good reason.

The cowboys were dashing on, in two bodies, and their plan was not immediately apparent, even to those who understood military movements.

But, from the nature of their first attack, their easy defeat and their disorderly retreat, it was reasoned that they had no leader who was capable of handling them aright.

For this reason their movement was, undoubtedly, an unusual one.

They went on for some distance, or until the grangers were well swung out and apparently ready to encircle them.

Then of a sudden both parties turned, by prearranged agreement as it must have been, and came sweeping back toward the first point of attack, deploying as they came.

Long John acted immediately.

Wheeling his horse, he called to his men, and his end of the long line of horsemen took the backward curve toward the trail.

Fair-hair Haley called a halt and waited for the effect of the new movement to reach him before he turned, thus to keep the line

unbroken, for the grangers had the advantage in both numbers and position.

The tenderfoot stranger halted, too, but Rube Russel failed to follow the example of Long John this time.

Billings seemed to take in the situation at a glance.

Unless Russel acted that minute, it would be too late for him to be of any service at the point of attack.

Russel hesitated, as if at loss what to do, and as if he did not understand what Long John intended to do, and then he acted, but making the worst mistake he could have made.

He uttered his command, and dashed down the line toward the opposite end, his men falling in with him as he came up with them, and in this way he was bunching them for the slaughter. He was inviting a loss of life that was a useless sacrifice, and the tenderfoot saw it.

"Your leader is making a mistake," he cried. "We must reach the lane, the same as Mr. Blodgett is striving to do. We can make it, from here. Forward!"

With a wave of the hand, off the tenderfoot dashed, and the men near him followed, to regain their position along the iron fence, and this had the effect, soon, to divide Russel's force into two sections.

The tenderfoot, with about half the men, reached the fence, while Russel in command of the other half rushed into contact with the cowboys, and for a few minutes there was a lively fight, in which several men were seriously hurt, and the result was that the cowboys, coming with force to the attack, broke through.

CHAPTER VI.

ALMOST A DUEL. A NEW DANGER.

RUBE RUSSEL was like a crazy man.

He raved and swore, laying the blame of his defeat upon the tenderfoot and vowing that he would repay him for it.

Had he had all his force, the fight would have been only the longer and harder, and many would have been killed. Had he followed the example of Long John it would not have happened.

He now found himself in a peculiar position.

The other grangers had taken nearly their first positions, the cowboys were rushing to the attack in deploy, in two companies, and he was in the rear of all.

He saw his mistake, now, and swung around to make it good, returning to the fence where he had been at first. But before he reached there the fight opened again as the forces came within shooting distance.

The charge was for the open lane, and as the cowboys came up they began to draw together to force their way through.

They met a stubborn resistance, however. Long John was there, on the one side, and the tenderfoot on the other, and each commanded his men like a veteran.

Mercy Blodgett fought with the rest, fearlessly, and was one of the few who seemed to bear a charm that ward off bullets. Neither she nor the tenderfoot was hit.

The tenderfoot?

It was now patent to all that the title was a misnomer.

He looked a dude from some city, but his appearance was deceptive, very. He was now fully aroused.

Commanding in a way that proved he was not altogether new to this sort of thing, he at the same time fought with all the coolness and precision of an old soldier of the regulars.

Long John saw this and admired the man.

On swooped the cowboys, straight for that lane, and as they came they formed like a wedge.

This was, to them, at once an advantage

and a disadvantage. They might be able to force through, and they could fire to better effect, yet they were more exposed to fire.

The granger forces were gathering in, now, seeing that it meant a fight at close quarters, and the cowboys were strongly met.

Then the fight waged hot and heavy.

Fair-hair Haley, it has been shown, had been thrown from the head to the rear of the line, by the sudden movement of Blodgett.

He had not yet reached the scene of action, and seeing that he could work to better advantage by not rushing in, he halted his men in deploy and opened fire from his side.

As soon as he did this the cowboy band began to waver.

Fortunately Rube Russel thought of the same thing a moment later, or followed Haley's example.

No matter which, he, too, opened fire from the other side, and in a few seconds the cowboys fell back, turned, and dashed away at full speed, now in utter defeat and rout.

The grangers sent up a ringing cheer, and fired a parting volley to hasten the flight of the foes.

Men dismounted immediately to attend to the wounds of their friends and neighbors who had been cut down in the fray, and it was with sadness they noted that some were beyond human assistance.

Rube Russel came riding through the gathered horsemen, white with rage.

"Where is that idiot?" he demanded.

"Who d'ye mean?" demanded Fair-hair Haley, in retort.

"That tenderfoot who presumed to take charge of my men, that is who," in a loud voice.

"I am right here," the tenderfoot himself spoke up, turning away from Miss Blodgett, whom he had congratulated upon her escape from harm. "I do not own to the charge of being an idiot, however, sir."

"Ha! yes, I see you are right there!" catching sight of him just as Billings spoke. "You are an idiot, and an ass, whether you own to the same or not, and I'm the man that says so. You are responsible for those dead men out yonder!" pointing with his left hand.

"There would be more of them there, had I not done as I did, sir," the tenderfoot retorted.

"You are a fool!"

"I trust you are not."

Russel was almost beside himself, with rage and jealousy commingled, but the tenderfoot was as cool as a cucumber—aggravatingly cool.

"Confound you!" Russel cried. "do you mean to insinuate that I am? Just draw a gun and come out here and defend yourself. You and I may as well settle accounts now as later."

"No, no!" cried Mercy Blodgett, urging her horse between them. "You must not fight—you shall not fight! Papa, forbid it, I beg of you."

"We must have nothing of the kind here," cried Long John. "What are you thinking about, Russel?"

"What am I thinking about? Did you not see what he did?"

"Yes; but—"

"Then that is what I am thinking about. I allow no man to take my authority out of my hands. Get your gun and come on, Philip Billings, if that is your name, and we will settle this thing!"

"No, no!" cried Mercy. "Has it not been horrible enough, without fighting now among ourselves? For shame, Mr. Russel!"

"You seem determined to save him, if you can."

"Did he not save me?"

"Yes, curse him; cheating me of the pleasure of doing so. No, I will not spare him, Mercy Blodgett; I have already one

rival for your hand, and I do not propose allowing another to come between."

"Which is equivalent to a threat against his life."

"I risk my own life against his. I will not stand such an indignity as he has heaped upon me. Out of the way!"

"No, I will not out of the way, sir. You shall not fight, if I can prevent it. What folly, that you should hold him to account for doing just what ought to have been done—"

"Zounds! do you mean to uphold him in what he did? He usurped authority over the men under my command, and left me with only half my number to meet the foe. If I had had them all I could have held them in check and routed them. By heavens! my blood is boiling."

"Miss Blodgett?"

It was the tenderfoot who addressed her.

He spoke quietly, and his coolness was in marked contrast to Russel's rage.

"What?" she asked him.

"Do you not see you are usurping my place in this matter? I cannot permit that. Please draw aside and let me face him."

"But, you will not fight?"

"In defense, yes, if need be. This trouble is of his making."

"Liar!" roared Russel. "It is of your making, as you ought to know. If you had minded your own business—"

"Your pardon, but that was just what I did. When you motioned us to swing out from the fence, in the first instance, I happened to be where the lead fell to me, and I accepted it."

"The lead nothing! You only obeyed my command. But, that was not the point. You took my men away from me—"

"When I saw you doing a foolish thing in which I could not take part. Now, sir, if you are determined to force this thing to a fight, get ready your gun and we will settle it."

So cool was the tenderfoot as he said this that every man looked upon him in amazement.

He had drawn one of his own splendid revolvers, which he had been seen to use with marked effect during the fight, and which he had afterward reloaded.

As if compelled by his implied command, Mercy Blodgett moved her position, and the two men glared at each other, Russel now with something of a pallor of countenance he had not had before.

"You are even a greater fool than I took you to be," he cried. "Do you not know that I can kill you easily?"

"Since that seems to be your desire, do not hesitate about doing it, sir. I am the challenged party, and I am ready to meet you. Now, come and fight, or back down and show yourself a coward."

"Back down? Never! Come out here and we will settle it—"

"Hillo! hillo! hillo! What's ther matter hyer? Gosh a'mi'ty! I thought I would never git hyer. What's in ther wind now?"

All looked in the direction of the voice, and there tearing down the lane on his mule was Pete Parrot, his bird on his shoulder and he bouncing clear from the back of the mule at every leap.

This diversion stayed the fight for the moment at least, Russel seeming not loth to have it so.

"Where have you been?" demanded Ike Wyman. "I heard you say you would be in this fight."

"Whar hev I been? I hev been tryin' to prevail upon Pontius Pilate to carry me out hyer, that's whar. By the time I got him out of the stable and saddled, the line of procession had departed, and do ye think he would fall in behind? Nary. Pontius Pilate is bound to be at the front, or he don't go. That's him. Well, I ordered and swore at him, but it was no go, so I jest got down and got a club and begun ter coax him. See them

'ar ridges on his sides? That's whar the coaxin' took effect."

"And he decided to come?"

"After I broke ther club, yes. He started so suddent, too, that he almost left me behind, but I grabbed tight and hung on, an' hyer we be. But, what's ther matter now, seein' that ther fight is over?"

The matter is that a fight of another kind is in order," answered one of the grangers.

"Not this hyer tenderfoot, I hope? Sonny, don't ye ever do et. Coffins is high out hyer, an' times is too lively to give ye any kind of a decent funeral jest now. Besides, boys, ef ye will jest cast yer gaze over thar ye will see thar is no time fer any sech foolishness now. Look!"

Pete Parrot pointed as he spoke, and all beheld a sight that chilled the blood in their veins, almost.

Over a distant roll of the prairie, in a long, dark line, appeared something that was not to be mistaken by the practiced eye, an immense herd of cattle in stampede, heading straight for the river.

"My God!" exclaimed Long John, "we are doomed!"

"Every face was blanched for the moment, and the so-called tenderfoot was the first to speak.

He appeared cool, even in the face of this worst danger that had yet confronted them.

"The wounded must be saved from being trampled to death," he cried. "There is just time to get them in the lane, if we hurry. Bring them all, friend and foe alike. Humanity demands it."

"Do it, in haste," supported Long John. "There is not a moment to spare. It seems useless, however. Great heavens! what is to be done?"

"We must turn the herd," said the tenderfoot, calmly.

"Turn it?"

"Yes."

"Might as well try to turn the course of the rolling ocean, young man. They are bound to run us down, unless we can get out of their course, and the fences will be as nothing before them."

"I say we must turn them," was the determined rejoinder, "and we can do it, too, if we are active about it."

"Have you ever seen a stampede of a herd of a thousand head of cattle?"

"I judge there are nearer two thousand in this herd."

"You are right. What is your plan?"

"We must run out and press them from the west side and so make them follow along the fence when they come to it. If we can do that, the danger will be averted and the fence and crops saved."

"You are right, you are right. I first thought you had in mind the idea of turning the herd right about and sending it back."

"No, no; an impossibility."

Russel and the others looked on and listened, save those who had gone to the rescue of the wounded, who were active in what they had set out to do.

The face of the deputy-sheriff was dark, and he glared at the tenderfoot with a look of keenest hatred. There was something in that look that boded no good to the young stranger.

Long John stood up in his stirrups and shouted his commands to the band of grangers around him.

"You who are looking after the wounded, get all of them into the lane if you can. Then take refuge there yourselves. All the rest of you, to a man, follow me!"

He waved his hat, put spurs to his horse, and dashed off.

With him went the crowd, with a cheer, and his daughter, on the stallion, was near him.

Pete Parrot, on his mule, fell in with the rest, and whether it was noticed or not, fell

in by the side of the tenderfoot, which place he held for some minutes.

They exchanged some words.

When he moved his position it was to get nearer to Rube Russel, and there he remained.

In the mean time the herd of cattle had been drawing nearer and nearer, and now the thunder roll of the thousands of hoofs could be heard, and the ground could almost be felt to tremble.

They were coming down the distant roll of prairie, now, and the top of the rise could be seen behind the moving mass, stripped of almost every vestige of green and looking almost like plowed ground. And behind the herd came the recently routed cowboys, urging the terrified animals on.

CHAPTER VII.

A COWARDLY SHOT. A NARROW ESCAPE.

THE whole scheme of the raiders was now understood.

The band of cowboys had hoped to open the fence, and when the herd of cattle came there would be nothing to stop it or to stand between it and the river.

Other cowboys with the herd had started the animals in stampede, and had directed their course, and perhaps only for the warning brought to town by Pete Parrot, the scheme would have been a success.

As it stood now, its success was in question.

Long John led his men to the west along the line of fence for some distance, and then swung out toward the herd.

The herd was coming straight for the fence, a dark, compact mass, with the sea of gleaming horns rising and falling like the sun-capped waves of a body of water, or like the bayonets of an advancing army, almost.

As the grangers turned with a shout toward the herd, they waved their hats and fired their weapons, their object being to frighten the animals nearest them and cause them to press against the mass, and so, perhaps, force the whole herd to turn more to the east.

At first the cattle did not appear to take notice of the horsemen, but when the grangers rode nearer they did.

There were tossing of heads and throwing of tails to indicate it.

"Press them!" cried Long John. "Press them! boys, press them!"

He himself took the lead, and near him rode Mercy, her face all aglow with the excitement and the exercise.

At the head, too, was the tenderfoot, who said nothing but silently obeyed the directions of the commander of the band, and with him rode Fair-hair Haley. Not a great distance off was Rube Russel.

Near Russel rode Pete Parrot on his homely mule, the mule keeping pace with the better-looking animals without great effort.

Pete seemed to have an eye constantly upon Russel.

Thus on they dashed, shouting, firing, hurrahing and waving their hats, and soon they were almost in contact with the oncoming herd, pressing it hard on the corner that was now nearest the fence.

Slowly, very slowly, the direction of the rush was changed, but it did not seem possible that a sufficient difference could be made in time to escape the wire fence and the crops that waved in the summer breeze just on the other side. But, every effort was made.

Suddenly a cry of horror went up.

All looked, and for a moment every cheek was paled with fear.

Further back the cattle had broken out of the line, and hundreds of them were branching out like an arm to encircle the granger band.

"Turn, instantly!" cried the tenderfoot. "If we do not we shall be caught and crushed! By facing that branch stubbornly we may be able to check the animals and so turn them."

"Yes, back! back!"

So cried Long John, and he had already wheeled and waved his order to the men, who were quick and prompt to obey.

They turned and dashed back at the outward corner of the on-coming long-horns, taking the herd quartering in order not to be caught by them, and as they dashed at the herd they fired.

Their fire was to hit, too, and as the bullets took effect some of the animals went to the ground, and the next behind them tumbled and fell, and there was a check in the advance almost immediately. But, it resulted in widening the reach of that living arm.

Outward it stretched, nearer and nearer toward the fence, until there was danger that the granger band would be caught by it after all.

However, the brave horsemen dashed on, firing as they ran, and there still seemed room and time enough.

Suddenly another cry was heard.

It was a woman's scream, and every head turned in the direction where Mercy Blodgett had last been seen.

To the horror of all it was discovered that the stallion had bolted and was dashing with her straight toward the angle where the living arm branched out from the main herd!

She was tugging at the rein, and was using her whip furiously to make the animal obey her will, but in vain.

"My God! she is doomed!" cried Long John. "Save yourselves, men; I will save my child or die with her! Keep straight on the way you are going, and get out if you can! Do not mind me!"

All had half checked their speed, all save one. He had done more; he had already turned and was dashing in the direction of the maddened stallion.

That one was the tenderfoot stranger, Philip Billings!

"Bully fer him!" yelled Parrot Pete. "I'll bet he'll fetch her out o' thar or die in ther 'tempt! 'Rah fer ther tenderfoot!"

"Curse him!" grated Rube Russel.

"Fair-hair Haley was on the other side, and had tried to turn to dash to the rescue, but found it impossible.

What he did was to turn in the opposite direction, to the rear, and it was obvious that he intended to round his comrades and follow the example of the tenderfoot.

Long John had now started, and after him went Rube Russel, followed in turn by Pete Parrot.

The main part of the command obeyed their commander's order.

By this time the tenderfoot was nearing the young lady, and he was leaning low in the saddle and urging his horse to its best speed.

It was a race of life or death, now. It was a question whether he could reach the stallion before it and the cattle met, and every man felt his heart almost stand still as he watched.

The stallion was rearing and plunging, and moving stubbornly forward to meet the herd, while the tenderfoot was speeding toward the young woman with long, swift strides such as only a splendid horse can make, and the distance rapidly narrowed. But, would he be in time?

He came nearer, leaning lower, and as he came he shouted:

"Keep your seat! Hold fast for your life! I will turn him, or I will take you from the saddle if I cannot do that!"

"I hear you!" the firm response from the imperiled but dauntless girl.

A few long strides more and the tender-

foot's horse was at the stallion's head, and a hand as of steel gripped the bit.

Then, whether guided or not no one could tell, the tenderfoot's horse turned away from the herd, and the stallion bounded along with it, held by the bit, and they both barely escaped the horns of the cattle.

"God be praised!" shouted Long John, as loudly as he could yell.

"Bet yer life!" cried the parrot on the shoulder of the man on the homely old mule.

"That's what's ther matter," yelled Pete Parrot himself. "You know a thing or two, Polly, darn me ef ye don't."

"Polly on deck! Sock it to 'em, Pete! Polly want booze! Set 'em up again!"

Spite of the danger, those who heard had to laugh.

And what of the danger now?

It was none the less.

The herd had been turned, true, so that it was running along the fence, and fence and crops had been saved!

But, there was even greater danger for these few who now found themselves hemmed in on nearly all sides by the crazed cattle.

The main body of the granger band were making good their escape. They were now passing around the end of that outstretched living arm, as we have termed it.

There was just room, between it and the fence, for their escape, and no more, and they were no more than in time to take advantage of it. But for the others that avenue was now closed.

Has the reader ever witnessed the stampede of one of these immense herds?

If not, it is hardly to be imagined in all its awful reality. It can best be likened to a tidal wave rushing, foam-crested, over a low marsh, where human beings are endeavoring to escape to the right or left before it can reach them.

Here the race was more than unequal.

On one hand was the main body of the herd, pressing nearer and nearer to the line of fence.

Behind came that outstretched arm, or hook, as it appeared, and its purpose seemed to be to catch these few daring riders and crush them in its embrace.

Ahead was a narrow, wedge-shaped space, the riders being in the narrow end of it, and even the broad end was scarcely broad enough to give much hope. For the moment it looked hopeless for them indeed.

"We cannot hope to escape," panted Mercy Blodgett.

"Yes, we will escape, if nothing happens," answered the tenderfoot.

"The fence is before us, and cattle on every side. There is no hope for us, sir."

"Keep up your courage, Miss Blodgett. The lane is ahead there, hidden just now, but we shall see it presently. We must gain it ahead of this army of cattle."

"Heavens! it is a race with death."

"Yes, truly."

It was like running the gantlet, almost.

On one hand the cattle were approaching, on the other receding, while the space between was none too wide.

The riders moved along it in a diagonal course toward the fence, in the very face of the long-horns, and the chances against them seemed more than the chances in their favor.

"Push on! push on!" cried Long John. "We must make the lane; it is our only salvation!"

"Yas, push on et is!" yelled Pete Parrot. "Dig in yer hoofs, Pontius Pilate, and show 'em what ye kin do at a pinch. Hustle, Mr. Russel, or I be darn ef my mewel won't ride ye down!"

The tenderfoot, still holding to the bit of the stallion, was urging it and his own horse to their greatest speed.

Needless to say, the others were doing the same.

The race was nearing its ending, now. The fence was just ahead, the line was fast closing in, and the lane must soon appear.

Its location could be noted, by the horsemen in it, those who had rescued the wounded men, but it was a question of grave doubt whether it would appear at the right moment at the opening.

Fair-hair Haley had long since joined the others, and was now on the opposite side of the stallion from the tenderfoot, ready to do his part if his assistance was needed, but for the present leaving all to the tenderfoot stranger, the wisest thing he could have done.

The last in the race was Pete Parrot, who was riding close behind Rube Russel, as if by design.

Long John was on the left of the tenderfoot.

"The lane! the lane!"

So the anxious father now cried out.

The lane it was, just in sight as the long line of the herd passed it.

Could they reach it? It looked doubtful, and yet they must! They plied whip and spur with desperate force.

"It will be a close call," spoke the tenderfoot, "but it must be made at all risks. Turn straight toward the horns of the cattle nearest the fence, Mr. Blodgett."

"Yes, yes, you are right."

"It will shorten the distance, you see. We will just make it, and no more, if nothing happens."

They now headed straight for the coming cattle for a short distance, and then straight at the open lane, being just opposite it, and the men there made room for them to enter.

Whip, spur, shout, all were now employed, and their horses seeming to realize the danger fairly flew over the ground.

They neared the lane, but so did the line of long-horns coming down along the fence, and it was going to be an escape by the skin of their teeth if at all. Every witness held his breath.

The men in greatest danger were Rube Russel and Pete Parrot.

Rube's horse appeared to be giving out, for he was losing ground. It seemed impossible that he could escape.

He urged, with word and blow, but to no purpose, and finally Pete Parrot heard him utter a stifled groan, followed by an angry imprecation as he drew a revolver from his hip.

Raising the weapon, he fired straight at the tenderfoot ahead of him!

Billings was seen to start, and immediately another report was heard and the weapon went flying out of Russel's hand.

"Cuss ye fer ther ornery cur ye are, anyhow!" roared Pete Parrot. "What did ye mean ter do, ye p'izen whelp? Fer one red cent I'd plug ye right through ther heart, I would by gosh!"

Russel's hand was bleeding, showing that Pete's bullet had wounded him, and he was pale with rage and pain.

"If I had another shot I'd show you!" he shouted defiantly.

"Lucky ye haven't got et, then, fer if ye had I'd be under the necessity o' droppin' ye out of that 'ar saddle, cuss ye. This is jest what I have been lookin' fer from you, an' I wasn't mistaken, et seems. Stay hyer, now, an' git ther life crushed out of ye by ther cattle!"

With that Pete urged his mule, and the homely animal let itself out wonderfully and was soon nearly up with the others.

They had now reached the lane.

Into it went Long John, then the tenderfoot and Fair hair Haley, with the stallion between them with its fair rider, and lastly, just by the skin of his teeth and barely that, came Pete Parrot.

The gap closed immediately behind him, and all escape for Rube Russel was cut off. With lurid imprecations he turned his horse and ran with the stampeding herd, and all hope for his life seemed gone. Ere long the horse would be gored, would fall, and the hundreds of hoofs would mangle horse and rider beyond recognition.

CHAPTER VIII.

RUSSEL'S DENIAL.

"GREAT heavens!" cried Mercy Blodgett, moved to pity by the sight, "he is doomed, he is doomed!"

"As he had orter be, blast him!" grated Pete Parrot. "I had a notion to doom him right through ther heart with an ounce of lead, ruther than shoot his hand as I did."

"Bet yer life!" chipped in Polly.

"What did he do?" asked Long John.

"Do? Dast him, he tried to pick ther tenderfoot hyer out of ther saddle, that was all!"

"Heavens, you must be mistaken, man!"

"Nary a mistake, pard. I was right behind him, watchin', for I had looked fer somethin' of ther kind. Ain't et so, Pard Tenderfoot? I seen you start when ther shot was fired."

The tenderfoot removed his hat and showed a crease along the side of it where the bullet had grazed.

"The infernal scoundrel!" cried Long John. "An inch nearer, and it would have been your death, and that of my daughter as well. Curse him! let him die."

"No, no, papa, that must not be, if he can be saved at all. That would be inhuman, you know. Can not something be done for the man? I can understand why he fired that shot, if no one else."

"Why did he?"

"Let us charitably believe that he was crazed at the moment."

"A man with such a mania as that is not wanted here, my child. Let him go with the cattle, no matter where he brings up."

All this in the space of a brief moment or two, for they had spoken hurriedly.

"Has any one a lasso?" asked the tenderfoot.

"Here is one," answered one of the grangers, who happened to have such a thing with him.

He untied the end of it from the horn of his saddle, and passed it over to Billings, coiled and ready for use, and all wondered what was going to be done with a lasso.

The tenderfoot took it, and cried:

"Make room; let me jump the fence there!"

He indicated the side of the lane, the direction the herd was moving.

The horsemen made a narrow way for him, as quickly as possible, and he made the attempt.

There was no room for a start for such an effort, but the tenderfoot evidently knew his horse well and did not hesitate.

A short spring, another, and the noble animal raised and cleared the wire with an ease that was astonishing. Not a man but had expected to see the horse come down upon the fence.

And no sooner over than the animal was off like the wind, down along the fence on the inside, abreast with the moving herd just on the opposite side.

Rube Russel was still mounted, and was trying to hold his place in the herd and ride with it.

That could not last long, however, and might end at any moment.

He did not see his rescuer coming.

He was only five or six cows' breadth distant from the fence, but might as well have been forty, so far as helping himself was concerned.

The more so as he had a wounded hand.

Billings dashed on until he was abreast with him, when he swung the lasso over his head and threw it.

Out it flew, uncoiling as it went, like a slender serpent seeking its prey, to allow the imagination full play in making the figure, and then it settled.

Without haste, as it seemed to move, and without uncertainty, it went fairly over the head of the endangered horseman and settled around his body, and the thrower drew it gently taut.

Russel looked up in surprise.

"Work to the fence!" his rescuer cried.

"If your horse is gored, throw yourself across the cows' backs and I will see that you do not fall between them."

There was a dark look of hatred on the man's face, but his danger was great and he did not refuse the means that was offered, even though it was the hand of his hated rival, as he looked upon the tenderfoot.

He obeyed the directions given.

Billings held the lasso taut, and his rein well in hand.

Russel succeeded in gaining one space, and almost another, when his horse reared up and fell backward.

One of the cows had gored it, and but for the lasso their rider must have fallen to the ground and been instantly trampled to death.

Russel tried to gain his feet on the backs of the cows, but he slipped in the act, though before he could fall the tenderfoot touched his horse and dashed away into the nodding grain.

The strength of the lasso was to be depended on, and Russel was jerked prone across the backs of the cows and dragged quickly to the fence.

It was a rather harsh means of rescue, but a thousand times better than his fate must have been without it. The moment he came to the fence he was over it, and fell with a thud to the ground.

The tenderfoot stopped immediately and rode back to where the man lay.

"Are you alive?" he asked.

"Yes, curse you!" was the grated response.

"You don't seem very thankful for your life, anyhow, I must say."

"I had rather have been crushed by the cattle than be saved by you, curse you!"

"Why didn't you say so, then, before you accepted my aid?"

"You had me lassoed before I knew anything about your intent."

"Why didn't you cast it off?"

"You gave me no chance."

"You lie! I told you what to do, and you gladly obeyed my directions, when you were in peril. Take your life; I give it to you for the attempt you made upon mine, coward that you are."

"Have a care—"

"You are in no position to threaten, Rube Russel. I have done nothing to you, and had no intention of doing you harm. In fact, you were nothing to me. But, take a word of warning now: If you make any further attempt to harm me you will regret it in a bitter fashion."

"You have not wronged me? Curse you, what do you call it? Have you not robbed me of the woman I love?"

"No, I have done nothing of the kind."

"You lie!"

"I do not. Mercy Blodgett is nothing to me; why should she be? You are welcome to her, if she will have you, but common sense ought to tell you that your chances are slim."

"I know they are, now, curse you!"

"Why will you so persistently curse me?"

"You have robbed me of her."

"I tell you I have done nothing of the kind."

"And I tell you you lie. She loves you; any one can see it, now."

"Pshaw! you are jealous, that is all that's the matter with you, man. I do not stand in your way."

"Yes you do, curse you, you have twice saved her life, and she loves you for it. Don't you suppose I know her well enough to read her thoughts? Before you came with your handsome face and good clothes it was only between me and Haley, but now neither of us stands a ghost of a chance."

"Well, I could not do otherwise than I have done. I had to save her life when it was in my power to do it."

"Oh, yes, certainly."

"Well, get up on your feet and we'll go back to the crowd."

"I don't know whether I want to go back or not. I hate myself, and you, and all the rest."

"You have no good reason to do so. I will tell you, if it will be any satisfaction to you, that it was Miss Blodgett who first urged some one to save you when she saw your danger."

"She did that?"

"Yes."

"And did she know that—"

"What?"

"How close my accidental shot came to you?"

"Was it accidental?"

"Yes."

"Then how do you know how close it came to me?"

"Well, I don't, but the weapon went off in your direction, and I thought I saw you start."

"Went off in my direction, did it?"

"Yes."

"Then the man who shot at you must have been terribly mistaken. He says you aimed and fired, and he shot you before you could do it again."

"Which answers my question. Mercy does know about the charge, then, and she may believe it against me. What if I say it was that old rascal himself who fired at you?"

"You are rather too late with that story, that is all the objection I see to it. The old fellow's word will stand, now. But, come, get up, if you are not hurt, and come back to the trail. I am not your foe, unless you go further and make me such, and I have given you fair warning."

Russel got upon his feet.

He was pale, and his paleness made him look handsome—for there was no denying the fact that he was a good-looking man.

"Go on," he said. "I will come. Whether we are foes or not will depend on your conduct toward Mercy Blodgett. I had rather been saved by any other man than you, curse you!"

His feeling against the tenderfoot was bitter, and he did not seek to disguise it in any manner.

Billings rode back to the company of grangers.

"I told ther boys you would do et, stranger," cried Pete Parrot. "Ef you ain't ther toughest tenderfoot I ever seen in all my born days, then I'll eat my hat, by gosh!"

"Proof again that you should not judge a man by the clothes he wears," was the light response.

"You are not a man from the East at all," declared Long John.

"Oh, yes I am," Billings assured.

"No matter where you are from," spoke up Mercy, "I have to thank you for saving my life again."

She held out her hand to him frankly.

"Pardon me, but I will not take your hand," said the tenderfoot, earnestly. "I have no wish to appear in a false light, as standing in the way of gentlemen who are seeking your hand."

The girl flushed.

"What do you mean?" she demanded.

"Just what I say. It was jealousy that

drove Mr. Russel to the madness of firing at me, and I must try not to give him cause for further feeling of the kind against me. I am given to understand he has one formidable rival, and certainly three would be a crowd."

He laughed lightly and turned to Mr. Blodgett.

"Well, we saved the fence and the crops," he said.

"Yes, and I have sent most of the men right on after the herd, to press the cattle beyond the line of fence. There they will drink their fill, and that will settle the trouble with them for this day."

"We were fortunate in being able to turn them."

"And more fortunate in having notice of their approach," declared Long John. "We owe a vote of thanks to this man."

He indicated Pete Parrot.

"Don't mention it," cried Pete. "Et didn't cost me anything, an' you got et at cost price. But, I want to give everybody fair warnin' that I am goin' to tie to this hyer tenderfoot, and the man what hits him hits me. Do ye hear that? Me, an' Polly hyer, an' Pontius Pilate, too, are all with ye, youngster!"

"Thank you, sir."

"Et ain't necessary; don't mention et. But let any p'izen critter fire at ye again, like that cuss did, an' see ef we won't salt him, that's all!"

"Are you saying, sir, that I fired at this man purposely?" cried Rube Russel, who had just come up on the other side of the fence.

"That's jest what I do say, Mister Man."

"Well, take care that you do not say it again. It was an accidental shot, and my good reputation here is enough in proof of it. John Blodgett, do you look upon me as such a desperado as that would imply?"

"It is hard to believe of you, Rube."

"And you, Mercy?"

"I did not see the shot fired, sir, but only the effect of it."

"Then you do not exonerate me. Well, I cannot prove it, but I swear that the shot was accidental, believe me or not."

"And I swear that you ar' the rankest, dankest liar that stands up on ther earth to-day!" shouted Pete Parrot. "Ef you jerked up yer arm by accident, and took a hasty squint at ther tenderfoot's head by accident, an' then let 'er go accidentally a-purpose, then et was an accident; and it was an accident that I plugged ther weepin out of yer paw the next second, jest when ye meant to have another accident."

"You old liar! You would swear my life away, had the shot killed the man."

"No I wouldn't nuther. Ef you had killed him, I would 'a' been yer judge and executioner right thar on ther spot. That same bullet that marred yer hand would 'a' pierced yer vile heart, an' don't ye doubt it."

"Here, here, enough of this!" cried Long John. "Let it drop. These wounded men must be attended to."

Blodgett spoke with decision, suiting action to his words, and there the matter ended for the time being. But Russel was sullen, and it was plain to all that there was further trouble ahead.

CHAPTER IX.

PETE ACCUSED AND MERCY MISSING.

THE remainder of that day at Clear Water was a time of anxiety.

On the one hand, the women of the town and surrounding settlement had their hands full in looking after the wounded.

On the other, the men were on the alert for another attack on the part of the cowboy cut-throats, as they called the foe. They could not tell at what moment they would come.

And as night came on the anxiety increased.

A night attack was more to be dreaded than an attack by day, for then darkness would cover the enemy.

"I had ruther fight Injuns, a heap sight," declared Pete Parrot, in which his bird Polly immediately acquiesced, and called for a drink. "Ye know how to take ther redskins, but ther white is p'izen."

And in this all the rest agreed.

Philip Billings had now assumed his place in the town as the heir of Reuben Wickham.

He was no longer looked upon as a tenderfoot, and no one thought of calling him such. Long John Blodgett had taken him to his heart, and the man who might offend him offended Long John.

It was after supper, as night was coming on, that Billings and Long John met on the piazza of the Antelope Hotel.

"Well, what do you think of the situation?" asked Billings.

"It is dangerous," was the response.

"You think, then, there will be an attack?"

"I certainly do."

"And what is your plan?"

"I have about decided to divide my force into five companies. Four of these I will post at the points leading into the town, and the other I will hold here in the town as a reserve."

"And if attack is made, the reserve force will go to that point at once, and there add its strength."

"Exactly."

"The plan is a good one, and I believe it will work, if there is an attack. I should think the fellows had enough for one dose."

"The trouble is they will desire to give us a dose in return, now. This defeat will only fire them up for more revenge. I am afraid the matter is not going to stop with this."

"What then?"

"The grangers of the whole county may have to turn out."

"And in that case—"

"It may be that soldiers will have to be brought to the scene before the invaders can be driven out."

"Well, it will not be the first time. But, I think we can make a strong showing. However, I had a thought I wanted to propose to you."

"What is it?"

"How will it do to patrol the fence in every direction?"

"Not a bad idea, perhaps— Ha!"

A flash on the other side of the street, the thud of a bullet as it buried itself in the side of the building and the report of a revolver.

Both Blodgett and his companion had immediately sprung to their feet.

"Who was that intended for?" cried Long John.

"For me, I think," answered Billings, his revolver ready in hand as he peered across the street in the gathering gloom.

"What reason have you to think so?"

"It came mighty close."

At that moment Rube Russel came out of the bar-room.

"Hello! what's up?" he demanded.

"Another shot fired at Mr. Billings," answered Long John.

"Well, it certainly wasn't me this time, that is sure. Where is that homely bag of bones who calls himself Pete Parrot?"

He was not in sight, anyhow.

"Keep watch of the place where that shot came from, Mr. Blodgett," said Billings. "I am going over there. If another is fired, shoot at the spot where the flash is seen before the assassin can withdraw."

"I'll do it, sir; but, you expose yourself."

"No more than I am exposed right here."

He descended from the piazza immediately, and crossed the street.

As he did so a man stepped out of the shadows on that side, advancing straight toward him.

"Et ain't no use, pard," he said as he came. "I tried ter nail ther cuss, but he was too quick fer me an' got off. Yer life ain't safe here a minnit."

"So it seems. Did you get a good look at the man?"

"No."

"Would not know him again?"

"No, didn't git a sight of his face at all, an' he was gone almost 'fore I could git out my gun."

"That is queer."

"Et's jes' so darn queer that I wish I'd 'a' let go at him, hit or miss."

"It would have been hit, Pete."

"I reckon it would, Dicky."

Ha! then our surmise all along was right; this was none other than Deadwood Dick!

Yes, Deadwood Dick it was, here upon a matter of special business, as can be inferred from the role we have seen him enacting. What that business was, let the story unfold.

Long John and Rube Russel were now coming to the spot.

"Ha! the very man I was asking for!" cried Russel.

"So it is," acknowledged Long John.

"What do you know about this, fellow?" Russel demanded.

"I mought 'a' knowed more, ef I had plugged ther cuss," Pete answered.

"Do you mean to say you did not fire that shot yourself?"

"Course I do. What d'ye take me fer, anyhow?"

"You look equal to anything."

"An' my looks don't belie me, in some respects. Do you mean ter intergate that et was me fired at ther tenderfoot hyer? Beg yer pardon, Mr. Billings; that name is a back number, now."

"That is just what I do mean, man."

"Wull, you ar' a mighty long ways off, that's all."

"Let us see your weapons."

"Wull, dast your eyes, anyhow! Ye don't make no bones about et, do ye? Hyer they ar', an' that's the one that hurt yer fingers fer ye a spell ago. Look out fer that one 'specially sharp."

"Are they all loaded?" asked Billings—let us call him Deadwood Dick, however, since we have his identity."

"Every one of 'em," answered Pete.

"Then it can hardly be that he fired the shot," Dick remarked.

"I don't know about that," urged Russel. "Have you got any cartridges about you, sir?"

"Plenty of 'em," answered Pete.

"Then what was to hinder him from throwing out the empty one and putting a new one in place of it?" Russel demanded, turning to Dick.

"It could have been done, but I am inclined to take the man's word for it that it was not he who fired."

"Well, I am not. There is the smell of powder on this gun, showing that it had recently been used—"

"So they have, both of 'em," cried Pete. "That's the one that dislocated a finger or two fer you, and wasn't I blazin' away with the rest of ye at the cowboys we tackled?"

"This powder smells fresher than that."

"Let me examine the weapons?" asked Dick.

"They were handed to him."

"Are they warm, or either of them?" asked Long John.

"One is warm, just as if it had been fired," spoke up Russel. "Long John, I accuse this man of having fired the shot."

"It will be another thing to prove it."

"Ye can't prove et," cried Pete, "fer I didn't do et. Ef I had done et, as you say, and had taken out ther empty shell, et can

be found, an' ef it matches to a hair the rest of the cartridges I have got, then you will begin to have somethin' ter back up ther charge."

"Which I take as proof that you have disposed of it where it can't be found," said Russel.

"Ding bast your ornery kerkiss!" cried Pete, doubling his horny fists, "I hev a slick notion ter bat you one under the eye that will make you think thar's a heavy fall o' meeters hyerabouts! You mean ter say that I'm ornery enough ter shoot a man in ther dark like that other cuss tried to do? Wull, I ain't; but ef et had been you—"

"You are my prisoner."

Russel laid a hand on his shoulder and leveled one of Pete's own weapons at his head.

"—thar wouldn't 'a' been nothin' strange about et, fer I hev seen you up to that sort o' trick," Pete continued right on.

"On what charge do you arrest this man?" asked Deadwood Dick.

"The charge of having attempted your life."

"Have I made such a complaint against him?"

"Not necessary; I arrest him on suspicion upon my own responsibility."

"And what will you do with him?"

"He will go to the calaboose till I send him over to the county jail, and he will go there, you can bet!"

"Well, I suppose you have the authority to do it. I am sorry for you, old man, for I don't believe you had anything to do with this at all. I will help you out of it if I can."

"I demand a hearin'," cried Pete.

"You will have that in the morning. Come along with me."

"This is rough, hang ef et ain't. Ter be nabbed up an' charged with a deed I never done. Will somebody look after my mewel, Pontius Pilate? I've got my parrot in my pocket."

"Your mule shall be attened to," promised Long John.

"And I will accompany you to the lock-up," said Dick.

"That's kind of ye, anyhow," said Pete.

"I honest hope ye don't think I did shoot at ye, stranger."

"Of course I do not think so."

"Then how came you to be so close to the spot where the shot was fired?" demanded Russel.

"I'll tell that at my hearin', ef et's all the same ter you," Pete answered sullenly.

"Of course it is all the same to me."

Nevertheless, Russel looked hard at Pete, as if trying to read him through.

He led his prisoner away, Dick going with them, and Long John explained to the gathering crowd what had happened.

This done, he called his men together and put before them his ideas concerning the plans he had mapped out for the night, which were readily agreed to, and the different parties were told off.

They soon went to their respective stations.

After they had been gone a little time Deadwood Dick rejoined Blodgett on the hotel piazza.

"Well, he lodged the prisoner in the calaboose, I suppose?" Long John remarked.

"Yes, and the man is as innocent as you are."

"I believe it."

"I know it. I will tell you, privately, and you need not let it out at present, that man is no stranger to me."

"Then it certainly is not so. It is revenge on the part of Russel, for the wounded hand he is carrying around with him."

"Yes, that or worse."

"What do you mean?"

"The shot may have been fired by some one in his employ."

"Heavens! I dare not believe it of him,

Billings. Still, there is no use denying the evidence that he shot at you once before."

"It must be so. He is jealous—"

"Ha! that reminds me, where is Mercy?"

"Your daughter?"

"Exactly. I have not seen her since supper, and for a considerable time before."

"This is serious, or may be. She must be found immediately."

Long John ran into the house and inquired, and when he came out he looked more troubled than ever.

She was not there, had not taken supper there, and no one had seen her for a long while.

Blodgett was anxious and excited, and called out for half a dozen men to get their horses immediately.

"Where do you think she can be?" asked Dick.

"She may have gone home, for one place. Or, it is just possible that she may have gone out with Fair-hair Haley."

"That is not likely, sir. He went out after supper, and she would not have gone without your leave, if I understand anything of the young lady."

"You are right, you are right. Still, I'll send there. My God, I hope nothing has happened her!"

"So do I, sir, earnestly."

"What is the matter, Blodgett?" called out Rube Russel, coming up just then.

He was told, and immediately he became as much concerned as the girl's father, if not more so, and all could understand why.

"She must be found!" he cried. "Sambo! where are you? Get my horse just as quick as you can, and one for yourself. I will ride to your house with all haste, Mr. Blodgett, and see if she is there."

CHAPTER X.

RUSSEL'S RUSE—DICK'S PLAN.

RUBE RUSSEL carried his right hand bandaged and in a sling.

Spite of that he was around as active as he had been before, if not more so, and now he was full of energy.

It was an open secret that he loved Mercy Blodgett, and it was as well known that the girl would have nothing to do with him. Her preference had been for Fair-hair Haley.

Russel's negro servant soon had his master's horse ready, and brought it forward, mounted upon another himself.

Blodgett had already sent out men in other directions.

"I will bring her to you, if she is at the house, or word from her that she is all right," said Russel, as he accepted assistance to mount.

"Yes, do," Long John urged. "I thank you for your interest in the matter, Rube, and I'm sorry things have been going wrong of late. Still, you save my child and I won't forget it."

"I'll do it or die. Where is Haley?"

"Out on the north trail, guarding the town on that side."

"Well, I will be back again just as soon as I can make the run to the place and get back."

"God speed you."

Russel and his "nigger" were off at once, and Long John turned back again to the piazza.

Deadwood Dick was standing on the steps.

"I know not what to make of the man," Blodgett remarked, as he came up. "I cannot question his earnestness in his desire to find my child."

"I do question it," said Dick, coldly.

"Ha!"

"Yes, I do."

"What do you mean?"

"I think the man is playing you false."

"In what way? Why did you not make the charge to his face?"

"Well, I had my reason for not doing so.

Let me have a little talk with you, Mr. Blodgett."

"Yes, yes, certainly. You, too, are a mystery to me, Mr. Billings. The whole thing is full of mystery. And the absence of my child almost drives me mad. Still, I can do nothing; I must wait here for news of her."

"Let me hasten with what I have to say, sir."

"Proceed."

"Reuben Wickham was your friend."

"He was; I admired the man greatly, and mourned his death."

"You sent, quietly, for a detective to come here and solve the mystery, if it were possible."

"Ha! how know you this?" and he looked hard at the young, well-clad stranger.

"I am that detective!"

"You? You Deadwood Dick, Junior?"

"I am no one else. I came here purposefully, in this tenderfoot guise."

"You amaze me."

"I did not want any one to suspect my real character until I had had time to look around a little. But, events crowded me so that it was impossible to play out the role as I had intended doing, and I have reason to believe the guilty man suspects that everything is not right."

"And the right man—"

"Is Rube Russel."

"Great heavens! you would not charge him with the killing of Reuben Wickham?"

"Well, I will stop short of putting it in so many words; there is always room for a mistake, you know."

"But, you suspect it."

"I do, for a certainty."

"And what will you do?"

"First, I want you to set my comrade at liberty."

"Your comrade?"

"The man calling himself Pete Parrot."

"Will wonders ever cease? Then that man is your aide in this case? But, he has been placed there by the proper officer."

"There is little time to talk, Mr. Blodgett. My belief is that Rube Russel is at the bottom of your daughter's disappearance, and we must block him off as soon as possible."

"Worse and worse. Only that you claim to be Deadwood Dick, I'd think you crazy."

"I am far from it, I hope. But, attend me! When we all went out to meet the raiders, you know, Pete Parrot remained behind for some time. When he did come out it was with a story about his mule balking, or something of the kind."

"Yes, yes."

"Well, that was all talk, nothing more. I had pointed out a suspicion to him, and he remained behind to verify it if he could. He did pick up a clue against Russel, and had reason to believe that Russel suspected me, and from that moment watched him, and the story he told about Russel's firing at me is not to be doubted."

"And now?"

"My suspicion is that Russel and his ducky have gone for good. If he can get your daughter, even if he has not already done so, you may as well say good-by to him."

"Great heavens! why did you not make this known when he was here?"

"I could not prove it."

"Then what do you propose doing?"

"There is ample time. You must send word out to the men on the north and on the south to send a detachment in haste to the eastern trail."

"And then?"

"They can get there ahead of Russel and his ducky, and there they must arrest them, if they have your daughter with them; if not, let them go, but scout after them stealthily."

"I see, I see. It is almost impossible to believe it, though, sir."

"If Russel and his servant go on to the plain, that will be all the proof you will require. He has promised to come back here at once to let you know the truth. It would have looked better if he had suggested your going with him."

"True, true. But, you want your man?"

"Yes."

"Come, we will free him."

"First send the messengers, as I suggested."

Blodgett called two trusted men, and sent them forth upon the mission as Deadwood Dick had planned it.

Just at that moment a strange voice fell upon their ears.

Not that it was altogether strange, for it was one most of them had heard before.

"Hello, Dick!" it called. "Pete in a deuce of a fix. Polly want booze! Where's Dick? Set 'em up again for Polly, you bet!"

"It's that strange fellow's bird," said Blodgett.

"And it has been sent, too, I think," advised Dick, in low tone. "Let us step inside here. Here, Polly, this way!"

"Bet yer life, Dicky!"

Dick led the way into the hall of the hotel, Long John with him, and the bird hopped in after them.

Blodgett closed the door and Dick picked up the bird.

"As I thought," he remarked.

"What is it?"

"A note under Miss Polly's wing."

"From your partner in the lock-up, eh?"

"Yes, and it means something. Let us see."

Dick had quickly removed the paper, and placing the parrot on his shoulder, opened it to read:

It was like this:

"TENDERFOOT PARD:—

"There is a rotten egg in Denmark, you bet! I must git out of here. There's only one man on guard, and you can easy slug him in the dark. Have got somethin' 'portant to tell you."

"PETE."

"I now begin to see how well you are working together," observed Blodgett. "I will go with you to the jail immediately."

"Yes, come. As I told you, these exciting events here have made us depart from the plan we intended carrying out, but Pete is a pard to be relied on, every time. He has discovered something."

They made their way to the calaboose without loss of time.

Russel had left a man on guard at the door, as was customary when there was a prisoner.

At other times the lock-up was without a keeper, and stood silent and alone in an out-of-the-way spot in the rear of other buildings.

When they reached there the watchman stopped them.

"Who comes there?" he demanded.

"Long John Blodgett," was the answer.

The granger continued to advance, and they were soon at the door.

"The prisoner is safe," the watchman reported. "He can't git out o' here, you bet."

Then he saw who was with Blodgett, and he looked troubled.

"What's wanted?" he asked.

"The fact of the business is, we have come for the prisoner," said Blodgett. "It is pretty certain, now, that he is not the man at all who fired the shot."

"Does Russel say let him go?"

"No, but somebody with more authority than Russel says so."

"Who is that?"

"A deputy marshal."

"Ther doose ye say. But, why don't he see Russel? You know, Long John, I have ter do as Russel says."

"We can't waste time here," said Deadwood Dick. "Will you open the door, or will you not? Say quick!"

"When Rube Russel says so—"

Deadwood Dick laid hold upon his wrists with a force that almost crushed the bones, and which brought him to his knees, causing him to drop his gun to the ground.

Blodgett was amazed, for this guardsman was a fellow whom few men there at Clear Water would have cared to tackle.

"Take the key and open the door," ordered Dick, coolly.

Blodgett obeyed.

As soon as the door was opened Dick allowed the man to get up, but did not let him regain possession of his weapon.

"It is all right, my man," he said. "Since you could not help it, no blame can attach to

you, and if there is anything to answer, just refer your master to me. I am a deputy marshal."

"Blazes! I should say you're a general from Hot Springs, stranger. The man wot said you was a tenderfoot lied."

Dick smiled, and he and Blodgett entered the jail.

"Did yer get my message?" asked Pete.

"Yes."

"Well, free my legs and we'll slope."

Dick unlocked the chain that bound his pard, and asked what he had discovered.

"Et's all about that p'izen, ornery Russel," Pete exploded. "Pity I didn't drill him through ther gizzard when I had ther chance."

"What is it?"

"He's planned ter steal that gal!"

Blodgett looked at Dick, as if asking his pardon, and Dick nodded at him.

"It is nothing new to me," assured Dick; "I suspected it. But, Pete, give us the story, so we can act."

"Has he gone ter Blodgett's house?"

"Yes."

"Then ther first thing is ter head him off, fer he ain't comin' back this hyer way, but has gone fer keeps. Heard him say so."

"We have taken care of that already, Pete," explained Dick. "Let us have the plot as you know it."

"Well, first, that p'izen cuss is in the hire of the Cheyenne cattlemen, and has only been makin' a show of fightin' for the grangers hyer."

"That is hard to believe," Blodgett declared.

"Et's so, ef he didn't lie. He was talkin' with a cowboy spy jest back of ther jail hyer, and he planned with him to git ther gal off, an' do et so slick no one could suspect."

"Heavens! then my child is already in their power?"

"Reckon she aire."

"Rube Russel shall answer for this. Do you know where she has been taken, my man?"

"Out to ther cowboy band, ef they didn't lie jest fer my benefit, and I see no reason why they should do that, seein' they had me hyer fer keeps, as they thought."

"Then the way to rescue her will be to follow Russel and steal her out of his hands."

"Yes, but he will kill her before he will give her up, I fear."

"It must be done on the sly, so he will not know it."

"Who can undertake so daring a thing?"

"I can, and will."

Deadwood Dick spoke with that calm coolness so characteristic of him.

"I am with ye, Dicky," spoke up Pete. "Jest let me git ther saddle on old Pontius Pilate, and see ef we don't make some tall rustlin' in ther dry leaves!"

"Yes, come," said Dick. "No time is to be lost. Mr. Blodgett, I'll restore your daughter to your arms if it is in my power to do it. Russel may discover the men following him, but Pete and I will take care he don't discover us."

"Hasten, and God be with you in the undertaking."

CHAPTER XI.

DICK PLAYS A LONE HAND.

THEY made their way quickly back to the hotel.

There a surprise awaited them, and one that was not by any means agreeable to Blodgett.

Fair-hair Haley had just come in, a stranger with him, and he had just asked for Mr. Blodgett when he and Dick and Pete appeared on the spot.

"Here is a messenger from the cowboys, Mr. Blodgett," Haley reported.

"Well, what is wanted?" Blodgett demanded.

"I bring ye a proposal, sir," was the response.

"What is it?"

"We have your daughter."

"Curse you! and we have got you!"

Long John drew a gun and covered the man instantly.

"Et won't work," said the cowboy coolly. "Ef I don't go back free, ther wuss fer the gal."

"Let him go free, Mr. Blodgett," advised Deadwood Dick.

"Yes, I'm forced to."

Blodgett put away his weapon, but his face was dark.

"What is your proposal?" he asked.

"Give us a two-mile strip to the river, south side, and we'll restore the young woman to you."

"And what if I refuse?"

"I don't know."

"Who sent this proposal?" asked Deadwood Dick.

"Our chief."

"May I answer the man, Mr. Blodgett?" Dick asked.

"Yes."

"Well, sir, go back to your chief and tell him we want until to-morrow noon to consider. In the mean time the young woman is to be kept from all harm and well cared for."

"That's the answer?"

"It is."

"Then I'll be off. You'll go back with me?" to Haley. "Your men might not let me through the line unless ye do."

"I will go with you."

They turned and went back the way they had come, leaving Blodgett and the others standing and looking after them, and in a moment Blodgett spoke:

"I will not leave my child an hour in their hands, Mr. Bristol! If you think there is a doubt about your ability to rescue her, say so, and we'll go out there with all our force and demand her."

"It would never work, as you know well enough, if you will stop to think, sir. They would threaten her life if you pushed them, and might even take it."

"My God, you are right."

"Trust me and Pete; we will do what we can. Instead of following Russel, we will follow this cowboy. We will let your men do what they can with Russel, and they may be on hand to aid us."

"I will pass the word to them that you are out."

"Excellent, if it is not too late to reach them. Here are our beasts, Pete, so we'll mount and be off."

In a moment they were in the saddles, when they followed silently in the direction which Fair-hair Haley and the cowboy messenger had taken.

It was now an hour after dark, and the night was dark indeed.

There was no moon, and it being partly cloudy the time was favorable for most any villainous business.

In the mean time Rube Russel and his colored servant had hastened on their way to the Blodgett farm, and there stopped and applied at the door of the house for admission.

There was no one about the place but a young stripling of a lad, who had been left in charge.

He looked pale and frightened.

"Where is your mistress?" Russel demanded.

"She has been taken off," the lad answered, trembling.

"Taken off? What do you mean? Tell me all about it, and quick."

"She kem to the house, from the town, sir, and at the lane two men captured her and rode away with her."

"Was she on Thunderer?"

"No, her pony."

"Why didn't you run to the town and give the alarm?"

"A man met me when I started and told me to go back or he would blow my head off."

"Well, I will blow it off for you if you don't get there just as quick as you can and tell Long John what has happened."

"Y—y—yes, sir."

"And tell him that I and Pomp have gone right on to try and recover the lady. Don't let the grass grow under your feet, now."

"N—n—no, sir."

Russel and his servant dashed on, then, leaving the youth in much doubt where his greatest danger lay, whether in obeying the first order or the second.

He finally decided that the first danger was over, seeing that some time had passed, and set out for town in all haste.

He reached there only a short time after Dick and Pete had set out to follow the cowboy.

The news he brought created a conflict of doubt in the mind of Mr. Blodgett.

Such action on the part of Russel did not bespeak his guilt. Was it possible that Deadwood Dick was mistaken? But, then, the Prince of the West had a reputation at stake.

Long John was in a fever of doubt and despair almost, but he could do nothing. He could trust every man of his forces, he felt sure, and he could only await such news as they might bring him. And then, too, could he not trust Deadwood Dick? He certainly ought to.

Still—

But, a hundred fears and uncertainties rushed through his mind. What if the Prince of the West and Rube Russel should meet and fight?

The solution to that was speedy—the deputy sheriff would probably get the worst of it. But, if— There, fortunately for his peace of mind, came an interruption in the form of a messenger.

He was from the outpost on the east, from the men who had been sent to watch Russel's movements.

"Well, they've gone," were his first words.

"Who?"

"Rube and ther nigger."

"Where to?"

"Straight across prairie to the north; didn't stop to pick their way, but dug in their toes an' dusted."

A gleam of satisfaction lighted up Long John's face.

"That settles it," he said, speaking more to himself than to his messenger. "Deadwood Dick was right."

"Settles what?" cried the granger who had brought the word. "And what about Deadwood Dick? What do you know about him, Long John?"

"Ha! I was speaking to myself, but now that I have let the cat out of the bag I may as well tell you. That tenderfoot, Billings, is no other than Deadwood Dick, Junior."

"Thunder!"

"Keep it to yourself. He is after Russel, red-hot, and if Russel and the darky started straight across prairie, as you say, they knew where they were heading for, and all doubt is removed from my mind. God grant that Deadwood Dick may escape him."

"You say he is after him."

"I mean, escape his assassin bullets. There is no doubt, now, but that Russel desires to kill him, with a double purpose."

"The deuce!"

"Yes; first, he thinks him a rival for my child, and next he evidently has good reason to fear him."

"Well, Mr. Blodgett, you kin set et down for a fact that nobody hyerabouts is goin' to shed any salt, sad tears over him if he don't come back again—meanin' Russel, o' course."

"I understand. You say the men followed them?"

"Yes. Every hide and hair of us laid low till they had gone, an' then I kem this way and the others stalked after 'em."

"But they are likely to be discovered, so many of them."

"Don't know 'bout that; every hoof was muffled in a way that made 'em tread light as ghosts."

"Well, I am more than anxious to learn how it will come out. Were it not that I fear deception I would call our men together and ride out in that direction, to be in readiness."

On Long John Blodgett depended the defense of the town this night, and he could afford to take no risks.

But, to follow Deadwood Dick and Pete Parrot.

It was not necessary for them to exercise great care out as far as where the force of men was posted, but beyond that point it would be highly important.

So, they went along the trail till they neared the body of horsemen, when they slackened their pace and drew up with them at a walk, and as they did so they became aware that the cowboy had just gone on.

They made their way through, with a word of explanation, to where Haley stood after parting with the man, and there Dick consulted with him.

"Did you learn where they are encamped?" he asked.

"Yes, it is over on what we call Injun Ridge. A spot where they can defy us should we attack."

"Any of your men know where that is?"

"Nearly every one of them, I guess."

"Good. Just give us a guide, then, and we will not attempt to follow this fellow, for he would probably discover us— But, he may have told you that to deceive."

"No, it slipped out; it can be relied on."

"Give us the guide, then."

A man was named, who immediately came forward, and the trio set forth.

They proceeded at a walk, not trying to keep the cowboy in sight or overtake him.

Crossing one of the long, rolling ridges of the prairie, they advanced along for a considerable distance in the course of the depression on the other side, after which they crossed another ridge.

Then came a level stretch, then a sharp descent, and following that was a sharper rise than they had met with before.

"This is Injun Ridge," said the guide, halting.

"It is out of sight from Clear Water, by daylight?"

"Yes."

"Well, listen."

They strained their ears, and were soon satisfied that the cowboys were in camp not far distant.

"I am satisfied," said Dick. "Now, you and Pete remain here, keeping my horse with you, and I will make the venture."

Signals were agreed upon, to express various things that might or might not happen, and shaking hands with his sturdy old pard, Deadwood Dick took leave of him and disappeared in the gloom.

He had been gone but a few minutes when a horseman cantered down the slope, coming toward the ridge, a few yards distant from where Pete and the guide stood.

The horseman was going in very nearly the course Dick had taken.

"I hope he don't run onto your pard," whispered the guide.

"All I kin say is, it will prob'ly be bad medicine fer him ef he does," was Pete's grim comment.

Dick heard the horse coming, and had already dropped down in the grass, and when the horseman passed he was so close that Dick recognized him spite of the darkness around.

It was Rube Russel!

"Ha!" thought Dick, "I am on the right trail, true enough. Now for some fun, very probably, and I'll be in it. Are my guns in order, I wonder?"

His first business, when he rose to his feet, was to make sure that they were, and having done so, he went on in the direction the horseman had taken, feeling sure this was the quickest way to learn where the young lady prisoner was held.

CHAPTER XII.

RUSSEL A PRISONER.

RUBE RUSSEL had not proceeded a great distance further when he was stopped by a challenge.

"Who comes there?"

"Friend," the response. "I want to see Herder Hank, and at once."

"All right; ride on, friend, and inquire fer him at ther camp. But ef you ar' a spy, glory save yer neck, that's all."

"I am no spy."

Russel rode on, and this challenge having apprised Deadwood Dick of the position of the sentry, he had passed around them while they were talking and so gained the inside of the line.

He continued to follow Russel at a safe distance, and presently the camp proper was reached.

Another challenge was here given, and the horseman asked for Herder Hank, who soon made his appearance, demanding to know what was wanted.

"I'm Rube Russel," the wounded horseman announced. "Have you got the girl all right, Hank?"

"You kin bet yer life on et."

"Good. Now for the rest of the scheme, and I'm all right."

"The rest of ther scheme ain't goin' to work as you planned et, however, Rube Russel."

"What do you mean?"

"What I say."

"Yes, but what do you mean, I demand?"

"Wull, we hev made up our minds to make better use of ther gal fer a time."

"What! are you not going to allow me to carry out my scheme? Wasn't that the arrangement?"

"Your own arrangement, yes; but now we hev taken a hand in ther game, and I tell ye et ain't goin' to work that way. Don't think ye kin fail to ketch on to that, ef ye try."

"But, you will spoil my whole scheme, Hank. You know I said I would come here and pretend to fight for her, only a sham, of course, and carry her back to her father. That would put him under obligations to me, and would perhaps give me her regard."

"Can't help et, we have bigger things at stake 'n that."

"I don't see what."

"Well, we have sent word to Long John Blodgett that ef he will give us a way to the river he kin have his gal back again. He has answered, and he has got till to-morrow noon to make up his mind what he will do about it."

"Oh! curse you for the fools you are!"

"Nothin' foolish 'bout that, from our way of thinkin'."

Deadwood Dick, near at hand, was a listener to all, and he saw the scheme as a whole.

He wondered where the negro, Pomp, was, but gave little thought to his absence. He believed he understood his absence, however, as a very simple matter. Rube had wanted it to appear that he had rescued the girl alone and single-handed.

"But, you have ruined me."

"Oh, no; we kin work et another way, to your credit."

"How?"

"We kin make you prisoner, too."

"Foolishness run mad! What good'll that do?"

"It can appear that you came here to rescue the girl, but got trapped."

"Small good that will do me."

"It will show that your will was good enough, anyhow, and that you were not afraid to come and try it."

"Oh! had I but thought that you would go back on me like this, Herder Hank. You have ruined everything for me. My last chance is gone, my last hope destroyed. I curse you!"

"Ha! ha! ha! That don't hurt me."

"I never dreamed but that I could trust you fully, Hank."

"So ye kin, jest as fully as ye want to. But, here is a chance to make them 'ar cussed grangers come to our terms, and it ain't to be missed."

"Seems to me you are taking revenge for something. What have I done to you, anyhow?"

"Nothin'."

"I'll tell you, I'll give you more in cold cash, Hank, if you will help me on with this scheme, than you will ever get from those Cheyenne capitalists. Let me play the rescue act and take that girl back to her father."

"How much will ye give?"

"Five hundred dollars, just as soon as—"

"Soon as ye come into yer uncle's property, hey? Now that—"

"Take care how you talk about that, Hank. Another plot has got to be played before that will be perfected."

"Say, I think we had better draw aside and talk this over between ourselves. Don't you? This is private, boys. Come right this way, Rube."

Thus saying, the cowboy chieftain led the way in the very direction where Deadwood Dick was in hiding, and when he stopped only a clump of bushes divided him and Russel from the crouching detective.

"What is yer plot?" the cowboy leader asked.

"A man has come to Clear Water claiming to be Reuben Wickham's nephew, and it is plain he has a purpose in view."

"Plain as day, when you are the nephew yerself, Rube; ain't your name Reuben Wickham Russel? Well, I reckon! Ef you hadn't done the old codger up and got his will, your name would have been Dennis, though."

"Hist! take care no one hears you. That is the way of it. Who, then, can this man be but a detective?"

"It looks like it, anyhow."

"And if a detective, who do you suppose he can be?"

"How should I know?"

"You have seen him."

"When?"

"Didn't you see that dude who took part in the fight do-day?"

"That tenderfoot?"

"Exactly; but he isn't the tenderfoot he looks to be. He can shoot to a dot, has the strength of a giant, and can throw the lasso to perfection; while for riding—Clear Water can't show his equal."

"The devil you say!"

"In short, he answers the description of Deadwood Dick."

"Thunder an' lightnin'! You don't think et is him, do ye? Why didn't ye pop him over?"

"Curse him, he bears a charmed life!"

"Then you have tried it."

"Perhaps."

"Well, if that is ther case, Rube, you would stand a slim chance of deceivin' the old man Blodgett, with Deadwood Dick in the field."

"I don't know about that. It was partly for his benefit that I planned this scheme. It may close his eye for a time, and during that time I'll try to put the murder of Wickham on him."

"Folly!"

"I don't know about that. He was arrested on suspicion when he first came to the place."

The cowboy chieftain asked how, and the particulars were given, their conversation lasting

for some time. But, Herder Hank would not yield the position he had assumed.

Russel argued, and stormed, but all to no purpose; the leader of the cowboys was firm.

"Well, they can never see my hand in it, anyhow," declared Russel. "I will go back to the town and report that I have scouted and have found that she is here, if I can do no more."

"And slim chance if they will believe your story. But, do the best you can to make your own ends meet."

"Never come to me for a favor, Herder Hank."

"Not likely that I ever will, unless you come out on top and fall into the old gent's wealth, when I may brace you occasionally for a little item to hold the secret I've got."

"Curse you!"

"Ha! ha!"

Rube Russell turned and rode away in the darkness, and with his laugh the cowboy turned and entered his camp.

Like a shadow Deadwood Dick crept after Russel.

Allowing him to get a little distance from the camp, the man-hunter sprung suddenly upon him and dragged him out of the saddle.

With his wounded hand, Russel was at a disadvantage, and Dick had little trouble in gagging and binding him before he could utter a cry or give the alarm in any manner.

That done, Dick gave one of the signals agreed upon.

In a few moments Pete and the guide were with him, with their animals.

Russel's horse had shied, at the first attack, but now stood near by and was easily captured.

Dick told in whisper something of what had taken place, and with the aid of the others placed Russel on his horse and bound him there securely.

Leaving them again, Dick went off, and ere long came to where a party of horsemen were gathered in a depression under cover of tall grasses and bushes, and drew near enough to them to learn whether they were friends or foes.

He found they were some of the grangers. Approaching, he made his presence known in whisper, and had a consultation with them.

"I have made a prisoner of Rube Russell," he told them, "and now it is for you to make sure of his dark servant. He must be off in this direction, somewhere, for that is the way Rube was going."

"We'll have him," was the assurance.

And leaving their place of hiding, they rode forth as silently as ghostly riders on ghostly steeds.

Dick himself crept forward toward the sentry line again, and, after some minutes of careful watching, succeeded in passing through and gaining his former post near the camp.

He was taking a long risk, but he had taken just such risks many a time before, and he did not hesitate. It took him an hour to make half the circuit of the little camp, but at the end of that time he had discovered where the prisoner was. It was then the real task lay before him.

CHAPTER XIII.

DICK'S CLEVER RUSE.

THERE was a very small fire in the center of the camp circle.

Between Dick and that fire the line of picketed horses had extended till now, when he had gained the other side.

Near the fire, where its light fell, a temporary covering of blankets had been set up, on sticks, and as it was the only place of the kind in the camp it was in all likelihood the place where Mercy Blodgett was.

The opening of this rude tent, to call it by so dignified a name, was toward the fire.

On the other side of the fire the cowboys were sleeping.

Bristol hesitated while he gave the matter some careful thought, for it was a case that demanded it.

The rude tent was on a slight knoll, with its slope away from the fire and in the direction where Dick was hiding.

The fire cast the shadow of the tent that way, in a long, dark line.

That was the only means of approach, and after due thought Dick decided to take the risk with no further delay.

So, forward he crept, inch by inch, as flat upon the ground as he could lie, for not all the cowboys were asleep; some were sitting around the fire, talking over the events of the day.

As silently as one of the shadows he moved,

and at last, after several very close escapes from discovery, he reached the rear of the blanketed inclosure, or covering. And once there he listened intently to ascertain whether the young lady was sleeping or awake.

He discovered that she was awake.

A low, smothered sob, occasionally, made him aware of that. Nor had he expected to find her asleep.

Now the most dangerous part of all, to apprise her of his presence, and at the same time lead her to observe the silence necessary to their safety. He thought before he acted.

His plan decided upon, he cautiously put his hand in under the hanging blanket.

Feeling a blanket on the ground, he gave a slight tug at it.

There was silence instantly.

He knew the girl had felt the tug, and that she was listening, so he very guardedly whispered:

"Sh! Mercy?"

No response, and when he had waited a moment he whispered the same again.

"Mercy?"

"I hear you," the response, in as guarded a tone.

"Sh! I am here to save you if I can. Place your ear this way, so I cannot possibly be overheard."

"What is it?" asked a sweet voice the next moment, and so close to Dick's ear that he felt the warm breath on his face, as the blanket had been pulled just a very little aside. "Who are you?"

"I am Billings, the tenderfoot from Clear Water," said Dick.

"Thank God you have come!"

"You expected me?"

"I did."

Dick further drew aside the blanket, and took hold of the girl's hand, which instantly closed upon his own with a more than friendly clasp.

"Well, I am here to save you, but it is going to be a desperate chance," he said to her. "I cannot carry you away, and I dare not trust to your silence to creep after me, hampered as you are with skirts."

"How then? I will do anything—anything proper and possible, I care not what. I know I can trust you, and I do trust you."

"Well, here is the best plan I can think of—almost the only plan, in fact: You roll yourself in this blanket that is on the ground here, and I will tie a lasso around your waist."

"And then what?"

"I will creep away first, and will then draw you after me, when the proper chance comes."

"I'll do it, if you think it will succeed. I am not afraid to trust you, and will be as still as a mouse. Shall I roll up the blanket now?"

"Yes, but be as still as a mouse about it, as you say. Remember, your safety and my life depend on your silence. If I am discovered here I'll probably be shot with little loss of time."

"You can trust me."

She pressed his hand; he returned the pressure, and she drew away.

Dick felt, rather than heard, her moving around, but at that moment steps on the other side of the tent were heard.

Deadwood Dick dropped flat to the ground in the shadow, with his weapons ready for active use, and his heart was almost in his throat with concern for the young lady.

He could not believe that anything had been overheard; some one was probably coming to see if she was safe and all right.

"Be ye thar, miss?" a rough voice demanded.

"Yes, I am here," was the sad answer.

"Would you mind giving me something to put under my head?"

"Changed yer mind about stayin' awake all night, hev' ye? Thought ye would. Yes, I'll git ye somethin', of course. I'll give ye a saddle, best thing I know of."

"Yes, I am so weary I cannot keep awake."

"Wull, go ter sleep, fer nothin' is goin' ter harm ye, that I'll swar."

The man went off, and Deadwood Dick was proud of the young woman for the deception she had played upon the fellow.

The man soon returned with a saddle, which he handed in to the prisoner, and at once turned and went back to his place by the fire. And there was now an excuse for any slight noise the girl might make.

Putting the saddle down in a corner, she rolled herself in the blanket without delay.

Dick crept in at once, with the lasso he had brought.

Mercy was lying with her head toward the rear of the tent, as Dick had directed, and he

quickly made the lasso secure around her waist. Putting another hitch around her shoulders, he left the final fastening between her shoulders, next the ground, and was ready. The success or failure would now depend on him.

"Now," he whispered, "be hopeful. The lasso may pinch some, and the process will probably not be pleasant, but do not for the life of you make a cry if you can avoid doing so. Now, good-by till we meet again. If discovered, no other chance of escape will be given you."

"I know it. I trust you without question."

Dick wormed his way out of the tent, leaving the blanket loose, and slowly retreated the way he had come.

It was slow, as before, and he had to exercise greatest caution, but he was not discovered, and finally he came to the end of the lasso. Now his plan had to be put to the critical test.

Making sure that everything was as favorable as it was likely to be, he got a brace for his feet and began the pull, very cautiously putting his athlete's strength to it, and presently he felt the body of the fair creature at the other end of the lasso moving.

He kept up the strain, slowly, steadily, and without a sound that could be heard he finally drew the girl to him.

"Did it hurt you?" he asked.

"Not a bit," the answer. "It only pinched a little around my arms."

"Once more, and I will have you safe," Dick assured. "Another length of the lasso will take you to the sentry line."

Dick crept away himself, now with more speed than before, and ere long caught sight of one of the guardsmen in the darkness before him. The fellow had not been in that place when Dick entered the line.

Waiting for a time, Dick had the satisfaction of seeing the man move away, and as soon as he was out of sight Dick again crept forward.

Reaching the end of the lasso as before, he again drew the girl over the grass toward him.

He had just brought her to his side, and was ready to free her, when again the cowboy sentinel loomed up out of the darkness, and this time he discovered Dick.

With a caution of silence Dick rose to his feet, advancing toward the sentinel, at the same time whispering as if he might be one of the band himself, telling the man not to fire but to hear what he had to say.

CHAPTER XIV.

HOW THEY CAME OUT.

DICK continued talking, using the name of Herder Hank; until he was within a pace of the man.

Then, without a sign of warning he made a leap, and was upon the fellow like a tiger, his hands at his throat so that he could not utter a sound.

Backward he bore him, to the earth, and there, with his great strength, held him securely until he was half insensible, when he proceeded to gag him and tie his hands together.

It had been a close call, truly.

Dick next listened, to see if anything had been heard or seen, but nothing indicated it.

Hastening then to Miss Blodgett, he cut the lasso and assisted her to get out of the blanket, when, taking her hand, he led her rapidly away from the dangerous locality.

"Well, I'm glad it worked so well," observed Dick, when they were comparatively out of danger.

"How brave and noble you are!" the happy girl exclaimed.

"It is nothing."

"It is everything to me. I shall not forget it, Mr. Billings."

"That is return enough for the favor, then," answered Dick. "That, and the pleasure of restoring you to your father."

Dick had taken her hand, as said, to lead her forward through the darkness, and he felt her warm fingers close upon his with an embrace that seemed to signify more than gratitude.

He would have been more than human if he could have resisted the temptation to return it.

When they had gone a little distance further Dick signaled.

It was answered a little further down the hollow, and ere long the dull thud of muffled hoofs was heard.

The horsemen soon came up, and Dick was greeted heartily when he made known the success of his venture. The others, meantime, had succeeded in capturing the negro.

"I knowed he could do et!" cried Pete Parrot, as loudly as prudence would allow. "I knowed he could. He would 'a' got ye out, miss, ef ye had been chained fast to a dozen guardsmen wuss'n what Peter was in ther days of old. He's a terror, is my pard."

"Bet yer life on et!" chipped in Polly, who had been allowed to take her accustomed place on Pete's shoulder.

All laughed, but Dick enjoined silence.

They mounted, and proceeding with caution until they were well out of hearing, set forward then at a gallop for Clear Water.

When they came to the point where Fair-hair Haley was in charge of the band of guardsmen they were challenged, but were recognized as soon as they spoke, and were welcomed.

"Did you rescue the lady?" Fair-hair asked anxiously.

"Yes, indeed, I am here, thanks to Mr. Billings," Mercy herself cried out.

"Thank God you are safe!" Haley exclaimed.

"And Heaven bless you, sir, for such a service."

"Who would have rescued me if he had not?" asked Mercy.

"We trusted him," Haley answered.

They rode on to the town, where Long John was overjoyed to have his child restored to him.

There the people flocked out, spite of the lateness of the hour, and a cheer was sent up for the hero who had served so well in the time of need.

"You can never repay him, papa," declared Mercy, earnestly. "The greatest favor you can bestow upon him will be too small. Three times has he saved me, since he came here."

"I am aware of it, my child," the father answered, only.

"Don't mention it," waived Dick. "What is to be done with these prisoners? They are important ones, for in Rube Russel you behold the murderer of Reuben Wickham, his uncle."

The amazement at this disclosure was great. Dick, however, proved the statement, telling what he had overheard, and the prisoners were put in the calaboose under strong guard.

Then Deadwood Dick proposed that they go out in force, silently, and surround the cowboy band, if possible run off their horses, and when daylight came force them to surrender.

This was agreed to immediately.

Not only so, but Deadwood Dick himself was placed in command, an honor Long John Blodgett forced upon him.

Mercy Blodgett wanted to go, too, but this time her father sternly forbade, so she remained with the other women at the hotel, for, nearly all the women for miles around had come into the town.

The forces were gathered in, and Deadwood Dick took command of them all, but still allowing them to remain in four divisions, and these he placed under Long John, Fair-hair Haley, and two others, leaving himself free to move about and direct them as he thought best.

Silently they went forth, and as silently they surrounded the foe, and Dick himself took the risk of stampeding their horses.

He entered the lines, cut the tethers one after another, and then leaping to the back of one of the horses, gave a yell and fired his revolvers, and every horse took fright and made off immediately.

Of course this aroused the camp, and a few minutes later a wild, ringing cheer went up that chilled them.

They realized what had taken place, and Herder Hank rushed to the tent of blankets.

The young lady prisoner was gone!

Another cheer, and the cowboy band noted that it came from every hand; they were completely surrounded!

With many an oath the leader blamed his men, and especially those on guard, but that did not undo the mischief that had been done, and there was nothing they could do till daylight.

At the first break of dawn the cowboys on the ridge saw how completely they were hemmed in.

When it was fully light, Deadwood Dick hailed their leader.

He demanded an unconditional surrender, and when he made known who he was it was accepted, after a brief debate.

The cowboys were then told to throw down their arms, to a man, and come down the slope single file. Otherwise, they would be fired upon from every side at once and cut in pieces.

Without their horses they were helpless, and had to accept the terms that were offered, and throwing down their arms they gave themselves up, on the promise that they should be given their horses and allowed to depart. And this

promise was kept, with the exception of the leader.

Herder Hank was told that he was wanted as a witness against Rube Russel, the cowboy chief, and was held for that purpose, while all the others were allowed to depart, a volley being fired over their heads to hasten their flight when they set out. And thus were the raiders of Wyoming warned in this instance.

Later on it became necessary for Uncle Sam to take a hand in the game, as is well known.

The case against Rube Russel was complete. His negro, Pomp, had done the dark deed. His uncle had cast him off years before, but Rube was determined that he would come in for all his wealth, and so had come and settled near him in disguise, and when the time was ripe, had him killed. But, he made a mistake about the will, for the old man had made a later one than the one Rube destroyed, in which he had left everything to R. bert Haley, who had on one occasion saved his life.

Deadwood Dick was urged to stay there, especially by Mercy Blodgett, who desired it of him with tears in her eyes. But Dick, reading her heart, told her her dream could never be realized, and commending her to the love of faithful Fair-hair Haley, he and Pete took their leave.

THE END.

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